

NEW APPROACHES
TO CELTIC RELIGION
AND MYTHOLOGY



RETHINKING THE ANCIENT DRUIDS

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



MIRANDA ALDHOUSE-GREEN

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*This book is dedicated to my daughter, Elisabeth, and
my granddaughter, Lily, with much love.*

*And to the memory of Taliesin,
my beautiful blue Burmese cat.*

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CONTENTS

Series Editor's Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
List of Illustrations	xiii
Preface	xix
Prologue: The Untouched Cave	1
1 Time and Space: Contextualizing Druids in the Ancient World	9
2 Barbarians and Wise Men: Rethinking Classical Texts	25
3 Spiritual Spaces: Rites and Beliefs in Iron Age Britain and Gaul	41
4 Images and Symbols: Sacred Art and the Druids	59
5 Welsh Connections: Spotlight on Druidic Wales	79
6 A Holy War: Boudica and the Druids against Rome	97
7 From Runes to Spoons: Divining the Divine	113
8 Druids and Deities: Changing Spirits in Roman Gaul and Britain	131
9 Ideas of Afterlife: Death, Burial and Reincarnation	147
Epilogue: The Untouched Cave Revisited	163
Bibliography	167
Index	183

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The work of Miranda Aldhouse-Green needs no introduction to any reader whose interest is the study of Celtic religion. The author of many influential monographs and reference works on Celtic and provincial Roman religion, she is noted especially for her contributions to interpretation of art and iconography, but also for thematic studies of shamanism and bog burial that are pertinent to the present work.

In this new monograph on the Druids, Miranda's intent is to bring a fresh perspective to an old problem. This is to be especially welcomed in respect of the Druids, concerning whom we seem to have a never-ending flood of books, but perhaps rather too many on what we might term the 'long Druids' – ranging over topics as far-flung in time as early Greek cosmography and modern British antiquarianism. We have fewer studies that focus closely on the time and place in which the Druids are most often explicitly identified;¹ namely, the first centuries BCE/CE, and even fewer on the problem of dissecting the material footprint of Druids out of the wider materiality of Romano-Celtic religion. Very welcome here has been the emergence of new approaches from the archaeological side – one thinks of some recent studies by scholars such as Jane Webster, Andrew Fitzpatrick, as well as Miranda herself – that scope the possible models for the phenomenon of Druids out of Classical sources and try to envisage how these might leave a distinct mark in the material record.²

One might say that Miranda has not set herself any light task here. The archaeology of a priestly or ascetic class is apt to be more ephemeral than the evidence for religion itself; as Sir Mortimer Wheeler once observed, one can find the tub but miss Diogenes.³ A lifetime's work on the archaeological evidence from Celtic Britain and Gaul, however, makes her specially qualified to take on this challenge, which is very much in the spirit of 'new approaches' that defines this monograph series.

Jonathan M. Wooding,
Series Editor

Notes

¹ An important exception is Nora Chadwick's controversial, but important, 1966 monograph *The Druids*, which Miranda highlights in her introduction.

² See, for example, Jane Webster, 'At the end of the world: Druidic and other revitalization movements in post-conquest Gaul and Britain', *Britannia*, 30 (1999), 1–20; Andrew Fitzpatrick, 'Druids: Towards an Archaeology', in C. Gosden, H. Hamerow, P. de Jersey and G. Lock (eds), *Communities and Connections: Essays in Honour of Barry Cunliffe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 287–315; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids: Story of an Ancient Priesthood* (New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

³ R. E. M. Wheeler, *Archaeology from the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), p. 243.

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For the most part, even during this challenging time, museums and other bodies have been generous and helpful in providing illustrations – they deserve my particular gratitude: the Trustees of the British Museum; National Museum of Wales and the Welsh Portable Antiquities Scheme (in particular, Mark Lewis and Mark Lodwick); the Hull and East Riding Museum: Hull Museums (especially Dr Paula Gentil); the National Museum, Denmark (Johan Zakarias Gårdsvoll); the Northampton Archaeological Society (Andy Chapman); the Roman Baths Museum (Dr Stephen Clews); the Swiss National Museum, Zurich (Jeremias Beerli); Dr Silvia Alfaye and Professor Jimeno Martínez, University of Zaragoza and Complutense University of Madrid; Oriel Ynys Môn, Llangefni (Dr Ian Jones and the family of the late Mrs Eluned Ollosson from Hen-Dŷ); the Colchester Archaeological Trust (Philip Crummy); Colchester Town Council; Corinium Museum (Amanda Hart); the Danebury Archaeological Trust (Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe); Blink Films and the Smithsonian Channel; and Professor Raymond Howell.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Preface

Frontispiece: Tin mask, from the main culvert of the Roman baths, Bath. Height 33 centimetres. © Roman Baths Museum, Bath. xviii

Prologue

1 Early Iron Age bronze figurine of lunar goddess, from Culver Hole Cave, Gower. Height 10 centimetres. © Portable Antiquities Scheme, National Museum of Wales. 4

Chapter One

2 Portrait of Julius Caesar, Rome. © Paul Jenkins. 9
 3 View of Treaddur Bay, Anglesey. © Author. 11
 4 Diviciacus meets the Roman court. © Paul Jenkins. 14
 5 Iron Age silver coin of Dumnorix, with sword, a severed human head in one hand and a *carnyx* (war trumpet) in the other, with a wild boar; Aeduan mint. © Paul Jenkins. 15
 6 Iron Age gold coin from the Rennes region, northern France, depicting an armed horsewoman. © Paul Jenkins. 17

Chapter Two

7 Stone altar dedicated to Taranucus (Taranis), from Böckingen, Germany. © Württembergisches Landesmuseum, Stuttgart. 26
 8 Inscribed stone carving of Esus, from the *Nautes Parisiaca* Jupiter-column, Paris. © Paul Jenkins. 26
 9 Stained-glass image of Boudica (Boadicea) on the Queen's Window in Colchester Town Hall. © Author; by permission of Colchester Town Council. 31
 10 Reconstruction of Veleda's tower. © Anne Leaver. 33
 11 Re-enactment of burning a wicker man, Anglesey, December 2019, for Smithsonian Television series *Mystic Britain*. © Blink Films. 35

Chapter Three

- | | | |
|----|---|----|
| 12 | ‘Smugglers’ Cave’, near Culver Hole, Port Eynon, South Gower, showing how Culver Hole Cave (where the figurines were found) might have looked before it was walled-up to make a dovecote in the early modern period. © Derek Dye. | 43 |
| 13 | Late Iron Age bronze trumpet from Loughnashade, Co. Armagh. © Paul Jenkins. | 45 |
| 14 | Reconstruction of Iron Age sacrificial scene at La Tène, Switzerland. © Paul Jenkins. | 46 |
| 15 | Iron slave-gang chain from the ritual deposit at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. © National Museum of Wales. | 48 |
| 16 | Reconstruction of the Iron Age temple at Gournay-sur-Aronde (Oise), France. © Paul Jenkins. | 50 |
| 17 | Skeleton of a man buried in a disused grain silo, found during excavations of the Iron Age site at Danebury (Hampshire). The body’s crossed wrists suggest that his hands had been bound. © The Danebury Trust. | 52 |
| 18 | Male skeleton from the Iron Age cemetery at Mill Hill, Deal (Kent), showing the diadem around his head. © Paul Jenkins. | 54 |
| 19 | Set of three razors and what is possibly a sacrificial knife from a later Iron Age grave at Saint-Georges-lès-Baillargeaux (Vienne), France. © Centre archéologique européen du Mont Beuvray. | 55 |

Chapter Four

- | | | |
|----|--|----|
| 20 | Bronze image of a person with hooves and wearing a torc, from Bouray (Essonne), France. Height 42 centimetres. © Paul Jenkins. | 61 |
| 21 | Close-up of the triskele (three-armed symbol) on the crescentic plaque found at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. © National Museum of Wales. | 63 |
| 22 | Iron Age silver coin bearing the image of a moustached human face, sprouting antlers and wearing a wheel-decorated headdress, said to have been found in the British Midlands but probably minted in southern England; in the collections of the National Museum Wales. © Anne Leaver. | 64 |
| 23 | Iron Age gold coin from Corinium (Cirencester). The obverse bears the inscribed name Bodvoc, the reverse depicts a triple-tailed horse. © Corinium Museum. | 65 |

24	Iron Age potin coin minted by the Remi (a tribe of north-east Gaul). It bears an image of a woman with braided hair, seated cross-legged and carrying a torc in one hand. © Paul Jenkins.	66
25	Bronze sceptre-terminal, depicting a double horse and a horseman, with human severed trophy-heads hanging from the horse-harness, from a cemetery within the Iron Age fortified township of Numancia, Spain. © Professor Alfredo Jimeno Martínez.	67
26	Stone disembodied head, of Iron Age or Roman date, found re-used in a wall at Bryn y Môr Farm, Anglesey. © Oriel Ynys Môn, Llangefni, Anglesey.	69
27	The Mari Lwyd wassailing ceremony, Star Hill, Llanfihangel Tor y Mynydd, Gwent. © Professor Raymond Howell.	71
28	Gallo-Roman bronze figurine of a triple-horned wild boar/sow, Cahors, southern France. © Paul Jenkins.	72
29	Early Iron Age yew-wood figurine, the remaining eye made of quartz, like the larger alder image from Ballachulish. The figure illustrated was part of a group with a model boat from Roos Carr, Humber Estuary. Height approximately 35 centimetres. © Hull and East Riding Museum: Hull Museums.	73

Chapter Five

30	Late Iron Age gilded silver cauldron from Gundestrup in Jutland. It is decorated with scenes and divine images, including a 'vat scene' in which an immense 'god' dips a warrior into a vat or cauldron, perhaps to return him to life. Height 42 centimetres, diameter 69 centimetres. © National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.	81
31	Pair of late Iron Age bronze 'divination' spoons, from Castell Nadolig, Cardiganshire. Length 13 centimetres. © Nick Griffiths.	84
32	Skull of a young man buried in the Iron Age cemetery at Mill Hill, Deal, Kent, with his decorated bronze diadem. © Paul Jenkins.	85
33	Reconstructed bronze and leather headdress belonging to a man who died in the fourth century BC and was buried at Cerrig-y-Drudion, Denbighshire. © National Museum of Wales.	86
34	Fragment of a ceremonial bronze trumpet from the ritual deposit at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. © National Museum of Wales.	88

- 35 Bronze sceptre-bindings from the ritual deposit at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. © National Museum of Wales. 89
- 36 Stone head from Hen-Dŷ, Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll, Anglesey. Height 45 centimetres. © (on loan to Oriel Ynys Môn through the generosity of the late Mrs Eluned Ollosson from Hen-Dŷ and her family). 90

Chapter Six

- 37 'Humbug', the Belgian rabbit masquerading as Boudica's hare, in the Smithsonian Television series *Mystic Britain*, December 2019. © Author. By permission of Blink Films. 97
- 38 The body of a young late Iron Age man found in a peat bog at Lindow Moss, Cheshire. © the Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. 100
- 39 Gold bowl, depicting a hare, deer and moons, from Zurich Altstetten; sixth century BC. © Schweizerisches Landesmuseum. 102
- 40 Lost polychrome mosaic pavement from the *cella* of the fourth century AD temple to Nodens, Lydney. © Lydney Park Trust. 106
- 41 Part of the lead curse tablet, written in Gaulish, from Larzac, southern France; late Iron Age or early Roman date. © Paul Jenkins. 108

Chapter Seven

- 42 Reconstruction of the lot-casting rite among the Germans recorded by Tacitus in his *Germania*. © Anne Leaver. 114
- 43 The shank of the Romano-British sceptre or *sistrum* (ceremonial rattle) from Milton Ferry, Peterborough showing the 'runic' lines. © Author. 115
- 44 Replica of the tomb furniture, featuring the spouted bowl, gaming board, rods and medical instruments, from Stanway, Colchester, c. AD 50. © Colchester Archaeological Trust, by permission of Philip Crummy. 116
- 45 Reconstruction of a shamanic drug-induced trance. © Anne Leaver. 121
- 46 One of the *thuribula* (incense burners) from a Gallo-Roman subterranean shrine at Chartres. © Ian Dennis. 122
- 47 Part of the Gallo-Roman sacred calendar, from Coligny, France. © Author. 125

Chapter Eight

- 48 Skeleton of a woman wearing a lead torc back-to-front, 134
from Great Houghton, Northamptonshire; fourth century BC.
© Northampton Archaeological Society. By permission of
Andy Chapman.
- 49 Stone image of a male wearing antlers, his legs merged with 136
the bodies of two ram-headed serpents, from Roman Corinium.
© Corinium Museum.
- 50 Altar dedicated to Loucetius Mars and Nemetona, by a 139
Treveran called Peregrinus, from the temple to Sulis Minerva
at Bath. © Author. By permission of the Roman Baths Museum,
Bath.
- 51 Gilded silver spoon dedicated to Medugenus, from the fourth- 143
century AD hoard from Fison Way, Thetford. © Nick Griffiths.

Chapter Nine

- 52 Bronze sealed canister decorated with La Tène designs, from 150
an Iron Age female chariot-burial at Wetwang, East Yorkshire.
© Hull and East Riding Museum: Hull Museums.
- 53 Iron-stave-bound wooden bucket, with sacrificial equipment, 151
from a tomb in the third-century BC cemetery at Tartigny,
France. © Centre archéologique européen du Mont Beuvray.
- 54 Disembodied human skull, from a disused grain silo at 156
Danebury, Hampshire. © The Danebury Trust.

Epilogue

- 55 Late third-century AD bronze *trulleus* (saucepan) from a 165
hoard found in Coygan Cave, Carmarthenshire, bearing
a La Tène design of a triskele on its base. © Paul Jenkins.



FRONTISPIECE Tin mask, from the main culvert of the Roman baths, Bath. Height 33 centimetres. © Roman Baths Museum, Bath.

PREFACE

I wrote most of this book in the spring and summer of 2020, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, with its consonant lockdown. In spite of the curtailments on freedom necessarily imposed, there were two positives for me: first, the ability to write a more cohesive, joined-up text because I was able to work without much distraction, and second, because the need to complete the book provided a welcome structure to an otherwise discombobulated life. Just a day or so ago, something struck me concerning likenesses between the present pandemic and the era of the ancient Druids; namely, the powerful relationship between religion and crisis. Allowed back into my church just a few weeks ago, after five months of its closure, I have observed that, every week, our congregation is swelling and is attracting not only new people but also the young. On mentioning this to a friend, he replied that the padres serving during the First World War often remarked that there were few atheists in the trenches! I wonder whether this crisis-world might be applicable to the Druidic past. Could the flurry of religious activity that left clear archaeological footprints during the first centuries BC and AD (the manufacture of symbolic art-objects, watery deposition and sacrificial acts, for example) possibly have been partly a response to the threat of Roman domination and the loss of autonomy for those living on the western edge of the 'civilized' world?

Miranda Aldhouse-Green
September 2020

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PROLOGUE: THE UNTOUCHED CAVE

Ridges of bone, moulded, you'd think, by awkward thumbs,
freckles, red stubble, and the large pale astigmatic eyes:
the voice hoarse, fluent, not deep.

Well. People like you, he says, looking for secrets.
What we learned from Pythagoras. For a consoling echo
of your sweet doctrine from the untouched caves
of us poor primitives.

(FROM THE POEM *POSIDONIUS AND THE DRUIDS*,
BY ROWAN WILLIAMS, 2003)¹

In this poem, Rowan Williams refers to the doctrine of reincarnation, which Classical authors, such as the Greek writer Posidonius, describe as being adopted by the Gallo-British Druids from the philosophy of Pythagoras. In a few brief lines, Williams gets to the heart of how ancient Graeco-Roman chroniclers perceived the Druids: shrouded in mystery, arcane, edgy, disturbing and 'other'; sometimes revered as sophisticated philosophers and natural scientists, at other times as savage, bloodthirsty barbarian priesthoods, their hands steeped in human sacrificial blood. Williams' allusion to Pythagoras references a number of Classical authors' comments on the Gallic Druids: notably those of Julius Caesar, Diodorus Siculus and Lucan,² who speak of the Druidic doctrine of reincarnation, the transference of souls into new bodies at the death of the old.

Rethinking the Ancient Druids is intended – at least in part – as a companion volume to Nora Chadwick's lastingly invaluable book, *The Druids*, first published in 1966.³ Chadwick's study focused almost exclusively on the evidence from ancient Greek and Roman texts, particularly Diodorus, Strabo and Caesar. Her detailed analysis of the myriad ancient writers on the Druids is still widely used today as a valuable research tool. But *Rethinking the Ancient Druids* seeks instead to interrogate the archaeological evidence, which has expanded considerably since the 1960s, both in terms of discoveries and interpretations. The present author places the information gathered from material culture within the context both of anthropological theory and of comparative religion. And, where Classical sources

are discussed, these are scrutinized through the lens of modern critical theory that seeks to question the wisdom of accepting ancient comments on the Druids at face value,⁴ arguing that seemingly accurate descriptions of the Gauls and their Druids sometimes bore witness rather to a palimpsest of contemporary Greek and Roman attitudes and philosophies.

In his contribution to Sir Barry Cunliffe's *Festschrift*,⁵ Andrew Fitzpatrick draws together British and Gallic archaeological evidence for ritual activity, although he is wary of arguing for the necessity to attribute such testimony specifically to religious specialists, including Druids. Whilst recognizing the validity of such caution, my approach to the 'archaeology of Druids' takes a broader approach and uses 'Druids' as a term that may legitimately be applied both to those identified themselves as such (or were so recognized by their communities) and other individuals with religious knowledge and spiritual skills. So, I write from the perspective that religion was (and is) a specialized concern.

Among notable archaeological findings relevant to ancient Druids made within the past two decades are the highly significant artefacts found in 2005 in an underground Gallo-Roman house-shrine at Chartres, which had been the ancient tribal capital of the Carnutes. Caesar⁶ specifically mentions that this was the place chosen by the Druids as the site for their annual Assembly since it was deemed to be at the centre of Gaul. Briefly (since the Chartres shrine is discussed fully later in the book), the temple 'furniture' here included a set of clay *thuribula* (incense burners) inscribed with a list of spirits: one of the words on that list is 'Dru',⁷ very possibly a reference to Druids. Otherwise, the evidence from material culture is more shadowy and circumstantial. But in my view, the recent radiocarbon dating analyses of Welsh Iron Age (La Tène) art conducted as part of the *Technologies of Enchantment Project*, principally by the British Museum, the University of Oxford and National Museum Wales, has served to shine a spotlight on how early this symbolic 'language' was rooted in Wales. It is argued in the body of the present volume that the Druids might well have been crucial in inspiring and disseminating this sacred art.⁸

In my employment of theoretical and comparative religious perspectives, I refer to current theories of religious relativism, discourses on religious syncretism, acculturation, appropriation, fusion and accommodation, issues briefly touched upon in an earlier publication.⁹ Here, I argue that central to the Druids' role in Gallia and Britannia was their sacro-political leadership of what in the modern world (for example, in some Islamic societies) would be termed a 'theocracy', rule by religious functionaries. This position is supported by Caesar's testimony¹⁰ that the Druids' authority

was even sought before engaging in important matters of political and military consequence, and the description of at least one Gallic tribal leader, Diviciacus, ruler of the Aedui, who was both king and Druid.¹¹

One argument presented here, in the search for understanding of the Druids' place and functions in ancient Gallo-British society, is the notion that Britain – and perhaps Wales particularly – may have played a pivotal rather than a peripheral role in a religious leadership usually portrayed (certainly in Classical literature) as a primarily Gallic phenomenon. In this respect, I believe more attention should be paid to Caesar's throwaway comment that the Druids were thought to have originated in Britannia and thence spread to Gaul.¹² If we take the findings of the *Technologies of Enchantment Project* into account, it is notable that of the objects radiocarbon tested, some of the earliest that are demonstrably sacred are from Wales. One of these is a headdress (once thought to be a hanging bowl)¹³ from a grave at Cerrig-y-Drudion in Denbighshire, whose leather and horse-hair components revealed a date of the late fourth century BC. The pairs of 'divination spoons' – one from a ritual deposit at Castell Nadolig (Cardiganshire), the other from Ffynnogion (Denbighshire) – help to identify the presence of Iron Age ritualists in Wales. Like other pairs of spoons from Britain, their pattern of decoration is interesting, as the ornamentation is confined to the handles, suggesting purposeful tactile association between their sacred force and the practitioner(s) who wielded them. Of course, Tacitus's description of the Druidic holy of holies on Mona (Anglesey),¹⁴ (discussed later in this book) reinforces the notion of Wales as a nodal point for Druidic activity. Two archaeological factors come into play here: the finds made in 1943 during the construction of the military airfield at RAF Valley at Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey, and the discovery of Lindow Man, the Iron Age bog body during peat cutting in 1984, not far from the Welsh border. Llyn Cerrig Bach was a small lake in which later Iron Age high-value objects were deliberately deposited.¹⁵ If such activity was the result of votive practices at a sacred site, as is true for other comparable sites in Britain and Europe,¹⁶ then it is tempting to link Llyn Cerrig with Tacitus's reference to the Druids' *sanctum sanctorum* on the island. The Lindow Man association is more tenuous but nonetheless suggestive. This young man was subjected to sustained, grievous and ultimately fatal assaults, fed a special 'last supper', and stripped naked but for a fox-fur armlet and placed face down in a boggy pool in the Cheshire marsh.¹⁷ He died sometime around the mid-first century AD; this date and the location of his body's deposition may be significant, for it may perhaps allow speculation as to a link with the Boudican rebellion of AD 60. I have

argued elsewhere¹⁸ that when the Roman governor Suetonius Paulinus decided to destroy the Druidic stronghold on Anglesey, the direct route for his legions coming from south-east England would take his army quite close to the site of where Lindow Man's body was interred. And might it be that this killing was an aversion sacrifice,¹⁹ orchestrated by the beleaguered Druids in north Wales, in a desperate attempt to engage the spirit world and turn the legions back? One tiny piece of corroborative 'evidence' is the presence of a statistically significant amount of mistletoe pollen in Lindow Man's gut. If Pliny the Elder's testimony²⁰ is to be taken at face value, mistletoe growing on Valonia oaks was especially sacred, thought to have magical properties of healing and fertility.

The 'untouched cave' that forms the subtitle of this Prologue is more than just literary whimsy; it refers specifically to a recent find from a cave on the Gower Peninsula in south-west Wales (see Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 Early Iron Age bronze figurine of lunar goddess, from Culver Hole Cave, Gower. Height 10 centimetres. © Portable Antiquities Scheme, National Museum of Wales.

This is a small copper-alloy stylized image of a female, dating to the earliest Iron Age, naked apart from a huge crescentic ‘lunar’ headdress upon which swirling patterns can be dimly discerned through the heavy patina.²¹ This is not the only ancient image from the cave. Many decades prior to this discovery, a Roman-period figurine of an equally stylized mother-goddess, nursing two infants, was recorded as coming from the same cave.²² The deposition of sacred images here, on at least two occasions several centuries apart, suggests a persistent perception of this edgy, dark and secret place as a conduit to the spirit world. The placing of the ‘lunate’ figurine here conjures ideas of lighting the darkness, but also – perhaps – resonates with Caesar’s comment concerning both the Druids’ association with celestial bodies and the Gallic belief that their divine ancestor was Dis Pater, the Roman god of night.²³ The great sacred bronze calendar from Coligny in France, probably dating to the early Roman period but inscribed in Gaulish (see Chapter Seven, this volume), displays the significance of the moon’s phases in terms of planning ritual activities.²⁴ In many traditional religions, caves are deeply meaningful as liminal (or boundary) places where the barriers between the spirit and material worlds are regarded as particularly thin or permeable.²⁵ It is not difficult to imagine Culver Hole – a secret, remote and inaccessible cave on the outer rim of the western world – as a highly charged sacral space visited over time by ancient religious specialists, of whom some – perhaps – were Druids.

The frontispiece for this volume is a life-size tin mask of a human face from Bath. It is both shuttered and revealing in its expression and its discovery in the sacred reservoir of a Romano-British temple dedicated to a British goddess suggests to me that it might well represent a high priest of Sulis. Its gaze is disturbing and speaks of remoteness, otherness and otherworldliness. The physiognomy is that of a Briton, having no Classical caste of feature: its *en brosse* hair, so redolent of portraits on Iron Age coins and of descriptions of Gauls by Classical writers, its wedge-shaped nose and small gash-mouth all add to the essentially native character of the face. Here is no Roman god or priest but a cult-official who may not himself have been called a Druid but whose antecedents might well have been.

Notes

¹ From *Posidonius and the Druids*, by Rowan Williams: Rowan Williams, *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (Oxford: The Perpetua Press, 2003), p. 77. I am most grateful to Dr Williams for his permission to use this quotation.

² Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 28. 5; Lucan, *The Pharsalia*, 1. 441.

- ³ Nora Chadwick, *The Druids*, 2nd edition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997).
- ⁴ For example, in Antti Lampinen 'Fragments from the 'Middle Ground' – Posidonius' Northern Ethnography', *Arctos*, 48 (2014), 229–59.
- ⁵ A. P. Fitzpatrick, 'Druids: Towards an Archaeology', in C. Gosden, H. Hamerow, P. de Jersey and G. Lock (eds), *Communities and Connections: Essays in Honour of Barry Cunliffe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 287–315.
- ⁶ Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13.
- ⁷ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, 'The Magician's House: Druids, Prayers and Magic in Roman Gaul', in R. Haeussler and A. King (eds), *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period: Personal, Local and Global* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications XX, 2017), pp. 325–38.
- ⁸ J. Creighton, 'Visions of Power: Imagery and Symbols in Late Iron Age Britain', *Britannia*, 26 (1995), 285–301; Duncan Garrow, Chris Gosden and J. D. Hill (eds), *Rethinking Celtic Art* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2008). The *Technologies of Enchantment Project* involved radiocarbon dating of all art-decorated objects with adherent organic material, such as wood and leather.
- ⁹ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia: The Gods and Rituals of Roman Britain* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), pp. 215–31.
- ¹⁰ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13
- ¹¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 1. 90; *De Bello Gallico*, 1. 3.
- ¹² *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13.
- ¹³ Hubert Savory, *Guide Catalogue of the Early Iron Age Collections* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1976), pp. 26–7, fig. 5.
- ¹⁴ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14. 30
- ¹⁵ Phil Macdonald, *Llyn Cerrig Bach: A Study of the Copper Alloy Artefacts from the Insular La Tène Assemblage* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007); Philip Steele, *Llyn Cerrig Bach: The Treasure from the Iron Age* (Llangefni: Oriel Ynys Môn, 2012).
- ¹⁶ Richard Bradley, *The Passage of Arms: An Archaeological Analysis of Prehistoric Hoards and Votive Deposits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For a newer, alternative interpretation for some such sites, especially those with predominantly military deposits, see A. P. Fitzpatrick, 'The finds from La Tène in the British Museum: La Tène, Un Site, Un Mythe 6', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 98 (2018), 43–80.
- ¹⁷ Ian Stead, J. B. Bourke and Don Brothwell, *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984); Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Bog Bodies Uncovered: Solving Europe's Ancient Mystery* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015).
- ¹⁸ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Boudica Britannia* (London: Pearson Longman, 2006), pp. 156–60.
- ¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of ancient bog bodies as human sacrificial victims, see Aldhouse-Green, *Bog Bodies Uncovered* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), pp. 180–97.
- ²⁰ Pliny, *Natural History*, 16. 95.

- ²¹ Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*, p. 99, pl. ix. Information from Mark Lodwick, National Museum Wales.
- ²² Anon, 'Roman Britain in 1935', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 25 (1935), pl. 43; Miranda Green, *The Religions of Civilian Roman Britain* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports No. 24, 1976), p. 181; pl. XVIIc.
- ²³ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 14 and 18.
- ²⁴ M. Green, 'The Time Lords: Ritual Calendars, Druids and the Sacred Year', in A. Gibson and D. Simpson (eds), *Prehistoric Ritual and Religion* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1998), pp. 190–202; Adolfo Zavaroni, *On the Structure and Terminology of the Gaulish Calendar* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1609, 2007).
- ²⁵ V. Peša, 'Caves and the Sacral Landscape: A Case Study on the Neolithic and Early Aeneolithic Periods in South-east Central Europe', in D. Gheorghiu, G. Nash, H. Bender and E. Pásztor (eds), *Lands of the Shamans: Archaeology, Cosmology and Landscape* (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow, 2018), pp. 46–88.

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Chapter One

TIME AND SPACE: CONTEXTUALIZING DRUIDS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The two privileged classes are the Druids and the knights. The Druids are in charge of religion. They have control over public and private sacrifices, and give rulings on all religious questions. Large numbers of young men go to them for instruction, and they are greatly honoured by the people.

(CAESAR, *DE BELLO GALLICO*, 6. 13)¹

So wrote Julius Caesar in Book 6 of his war diaries covering his nearly decade-long command of the Roman army in its conquest of Gaul in the 50s BC (see Figure 2). Part of this section of his commentaries digresses from his record of battles won and territories annexed. Instead, Caesar here presents an apparently ethnographical account of the character, politics, habits and religious customs of this frontier region between the Roman Empire and the wild, almost legendary lands on its western periphery.



FIGURE 2 Portrait of Julius Caesar, Rome. © Paul Jenkins.

As the Prologue to the present volume suggests, my intention is to provide an archaeological companion to Nora Chadwick's 1966 publication *The Druids*, an invaluable account of the Classical sources that deal with Druids. But in order to make the archaeological perspective meaningful, it is necessary for me to set the stage by first engaging with the ancient Greek and Roman literature on the topic. For the most part, the subject of archaeologically visible Druids remains a matter for conjecture, supposition and debate. Despite the pitfalls and problems associated with the literary sources (dealt with in more detail in Chapter Two), it is the testimony of ancient chroniclers, such as Caesar, that presents us with direct information regarding the existence of this singular priesthood, who – if we are to believe Caesar – possessed such political as well as religious clout as to endow them with genuinely theocratic power.

Wise men from the west: who, where and when?

With the notable exception of Caesar, the vast majority of Classical authors allude to the Druids as exemplars of weirdness, of the 'other'. Various sub-tones, of which the most obvious is the notion of barbarism, may be identified in literary attitudes to the Druids: curiosity, contempt and wonder, often laced with a frisson of fear. It was while I was reading the chapter on the Middle East in Tim Marshall's enthralling book on geo-politics,² that the subtitle 'wise men from the west' came to me. For is it not significant that the Christmas story, as relayed in Matthew's Gospel of the Biblical New Testament,³ contains the report of 'wise men from the east', as among the first visitors to the manger where Jesus Christ was born? Matthew thought it sufficiently important to describe these three *magi* (magicians) as such, perhaps because they were 'other', foreign, exotic, powerful men who had travelled huge distances over desert terrain to be witnesses to Jesus's birth. So, too, were the Druids, at least as far as most ancient writers were concerned, although the emphasis on their barbarism is totally opposite to the awe and respect with which Matthew refers to the *magi* from the east, who brought with them gifts as exotic as themselves.

For the 'where', we need to return to Caesar. He makes it quite clear that the Druids were confined to Britain and Gaul: he is firm in his statement that the Germans (for whom the Rhine was their western frontier with Gaul) had no Druids.⁴ Significantly, he also comments that 'it is thought that the doctrine of the Druids was invented in Britain and was brought from there into Gaul',⁵ going on to explain that at the time of writing (53 BC), many apprentice Druids travelled from Gaul to Britannia for their studies.

So, from this, it is possible to imagine the presence of Druidic ‘universities’ in the far west. We will never be able to identify such colleges archaeologically. Indeed, Caesar’s testimony may be no more than fantasizing about this strange sacred brotherhood. But we must always return to the indisputable facts that Caesar stayed in Gaul for nearly ten years and that he led two expeditions to south-eastern Britain, even though they were each very brief. It is also necessary (and this question is raised fully in Chapter Two) to ask ourselves to what extent Caesar’s observations were the result of personal witness, and which were either ‘travellers’ tales’ or deliberately exaggerated stories fed to him in order to impress him or to fob him off with apparent truths so as to avoid sharing arcane doctrinal issues with him.

Caesar’s testimony concerning the location of the Druids (in Gallia and Britannia) may have influenced fellow, and broadly contemporary, writers such as Strabo, Diodorus Siculus and Lucan. When Tacitus – born in about AD 56, more than 100 years after Caesar’s death – wrote about the Druids in Britain,⁶ he was ‘recording’ events that took place when he was four years old, but he must have had access to the diaries of his father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, who served three times as an army officer stationed in Britannia: in AD 61, the AD early 70s and as governor in AD 77–83. So, Agricola was witness to the events of AD 60/61, at the time of the destruction of the Druids’ *sanctum sanctorum* on the sacred island of Mônâ (Anglesey) by the then-governor Suetonius Paulinus (see Figure 3).

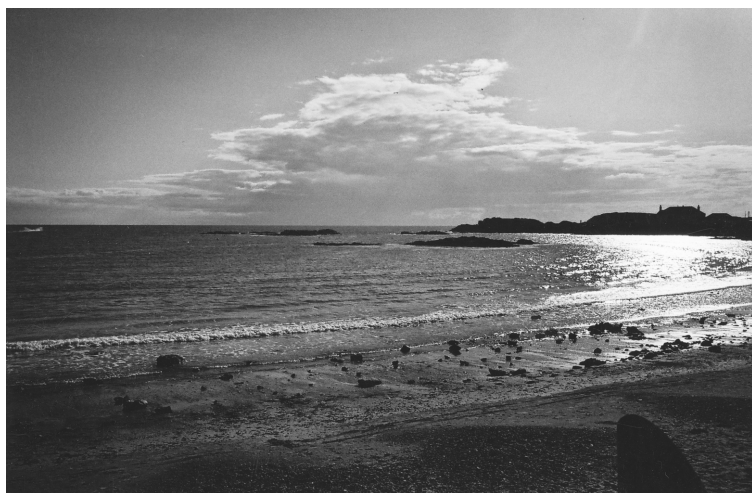


FIGURE 3 View of Treaddur Bay, Anglesey. © Author.

Pliny the Elder (AD 23/4–79) made significant comments concerning the location of the Druids,⁷ although he reverses Caesar’s assertion of their Britannic origins. Pliny speaks of the Druids crossing Ocean into Britain, a land which he describes as ‘the empty voids of Nature’, ruled by magic. (His views on Druids and magic were, of course, influenced by Roman notions on the edginess of Britannia as the ‘Wild West’).

And when were the Druids active? This is where ‘fuzzy logic’ comes in. Greek authors, such as Sotion (fl. c. 190 BC), and the writer Polyhistor (fl. 80–35 BC), might well have been trawled by authors such as Diodorus Siculus and Strabo, so we can perhaps push the Druids’ existence back at least beyond the second century BC. In terms of end dates, we have the dubious *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, which contain ‘biographies’ of late Roman emperors, such as Diocletian, Numerian and Aurelian.⁸ The *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* make repeated reference to the predictions made by Gaulish Druidesses (note the gender) as to which would-be candidate would attain the purple. Later still, the Aquitanian scholar and poet Ausonius,⁹ refers to dynasties of Druids whose mantle passed from father to son. So, long after the Roman conquests of Gaul and Britain, Druids remained, at least in the collective consciousness and memory of Rome, whether or not they survived in actuality.¹⁰

Gathering the weird

It has long been thought that writers about Druids – such as Caesar, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus – recycled the work of the earlier author Posidonius of Apamea, a city on the Syrian river Orontes. This Stoic philosopher, born in about 135 BC, spent much time researching customs and practices in Africa and the western provinces. Several later authors (including Athenaeus of Attaleia,¹¹ a physician who practised in Rome during Claudius’s reign in the mid-first century AD; and Strabo, a Greek from Pontus (64/63 BC to AD 21)),¹² specifically reference the lost works of Posidonius in their own descriptions of Gallic rituals and customs. Posidonius is frequently credited as having travelled widely in Gaul, but he may have limited his visits there to the far south, to Liguria and to the mouth of the Rhône,¹³ and so cannot be perceived by modern scholars as an authority on the Gaulish heartlands. As discussed later, in Chapter Two, it seems likely that Strabo and his near-contemporary Diodorus obtained much of their ‘factual material’ from Caesar’s war diaries rather than from Posidonius, and their more fanciful testimony concerning strange and barbaric Druidic rites perhaps from the stories of travellers and merchants

who spoke of the peculiar places to the north and west of the civilized world of Mediterranean lands.

Pliny's *Natural History* is a palimpsest of anecdotes and snippets of the weird and wonderful. A superlative example of this is in his almost universally known tale of the Druids, the mistletoe and the sacred oak.¹⁴ He begins his observation of this ritual with a somewhat derisory, sneering remark: 'the Druids – that is what they [the Gauls] call their magicians'. He then proceeds to describe the ceremony whereby the Druids, using a golden sickle, gathered bunches of mistletoe from the sacred *Valonia* oak, which they climbed for this purpose on the sixth day of the waxing moon, catching the mistletoe in a white cloak and sacrificing a pair of white bulls. According to Pliny, the mistletoe was deemed to have miraculous powers of healing and fertility. Pliny's testimony may or may not possess grains of veracity, but the description of the decoration and sacrifice of bulls is redolent of Roman sacrificial rituals, and it is quite possible that he either embroidered tales of cult practices in Gaul or invented the mistletoe-and-moon ritual altogether. What is important here is that Pliny's narrative is a sharp contrast to Caesar's far more respectful observations about the Druids.

While not directly relating to Druids, it is worth making reference to an extreme example of 'weird Britannia' as presented by the Greek author Herodian. He was a Syrian Greek who held a minor official post in Rome during the early third century AD. He wrote a moralizing 'History' that included a description of Britain that almost beggars belief, given the period in which he was writing, nearly 200 years after it became part of the Roman Empire. He speaks of barbarous Britons, wading naked (for they were unused to clothes) in the muddy swamps that covered the land, and covered in tattoos.¹⁵ Such 'testimony', late in date though it is, serves as a reminder that Britannia and her Druids remained in the consciousness as peculiar, barbaric and – perhaps – only just this side of human.

Diviciacus and Dumnorix

Caesar's 'ethnographical book' displays respect and even admiration for the Druids. During his sojourn as military commander in Gaul, he met Diviciacus, ruler of the Aedui (a powerful Burgundian tribe), and he and Caesar became staunch friends and allies, the Roman general commenting that he trusted the Aeduan chief above all the other Gauls.¹⁶ Caesar never specifically mentions Diviciacus as a Druid, but he is identified as such by Cicero. This Roman statesman, orator, philosopher and prolific writer,

met Diviciacus in Rome in 60 BC, when the latter visited the Senate as a suppliant, requesting help against his Germanic neighbours who were threatening to take over Aeduan lands (see Figure 4).



FIGURE 4 Diviciacus meets the Roman court. © Paul Jenkins.

Cicero was an ultra-sophisticated, cultured Roman, yet he speaks warmly of Diviciacus, identifying him as a Gaulish Druid and commenting that he was an expert in divination;¹⁷ the ability to predict the will of the gods by ritual means, such as augury (the study of bird flight patterns) or haruspicy (examining the entrails of animals killed in sacrificial rites).

But although Diviciacus appears to have had good credentials as a Gaul worthy of respect, his brother, Dumnorix, was regarded with deep suspicion by Caesar. Right at the beginning of his war diaries, the Roman general speaks of Orgetorix, an aspiring king of the Helvetii (a group of peoples occupying territory in roughly what is now Switzerland), who, in 58 BC, was stirring up trouble in Gaul because he wanted to extend Helvetian lands westward, and thus put pressure on those of the Aedui and others. Orgetorix was a master in persuasion, visiting the influential lords in neighbouring states and trying to curry favour with them to further his own expansionist and leadership campaigns. One of these was Dumnorix,

brother of the Aeduan ruler, to whom Orgetorix offered his daughter in marriage.¹⁸ If we fast-forward to 54 BC when Caesar was preparing for his second expedition to Britannia, Dumnorix pops up again, this time in open hostility to Caesar, despite the Aeduan alliance forged between the Roman commander and Diviciacus. So why is this relevant to Druids? Well, it transpired that Caesar was so uneasy about Dumnorix's volatility and the likelihood of his leadership of anti-Roman conspiracy that he demanded the Aeduan troublemaker accompany him to Britain. Dumnorix's response is interesting: he argued that he could not leave Gaul because his religious responsibilities perforce had to keep him at home.¹⁹ So what were these sacred duties? Was Dumnorix himself a Druid (see Figure 5), or was this simply one of a raft of excuses to try and stop him being forced to put a hold on his seditious activities?



FIGURE 5 Iron Age silver coin of Dumnorix, with sword, a severed human head in one hand and a *carnyx* (war trumpet) in the other, with a wild boar; Aeduan mint. © Paul Jenkins.

It is time to leave Caesar, Diviciacus and Dumnorix and turn to the first century AD and the increasingly hostile testimony of chroniclers such as Pliny, Lucan and Tacitus.

Changing times: from respect to hostility towards the Druids

Ghostly groves

The Roman poet Lucan lived a very short life, born in AD 39 and dying at the age of twenty-five. He wrote his epic *The Pharsalia* to tell the dramatic story of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar in the mid-first century BC. In Book 3 of the poem, he describes the sacred Druidic grove near Marseille,²⁰ encountered by Caesar and his forces on their march south to attack Pompey's army. He speaks of a menacing place, full of dark springs, animated trees and altars dripping with the blood of human sacrifices. He speaks of the trees as having the terrifying capacity not only to wave their branches and rattle their leaves even without a breeze, but also (triffling-like) to uproot and reposition themselves.

This passage of Lucan's resonates with the current increasing awareness of the ability for trees to communicate with each other via subterranean fungal networks, becoming known today as the 'wood-wide-web'. In his book *Underland*, Robert Macfarlane explains the complex symbiotic relationships between trees, both of the same and different species.²¹ Modern research has proved the capacity for healthy trees to divert nutrients, via their roots, to ailing ones, and for trees stricken by disease to alert their fellows so that they can boost their defensive systems against the threat of attack. Lucan's description of the Sacred Druidic grove is eerily redolent of tree-consciousness. He writes that this Massilian grove was so charged with sinister magic that even the priests gave it a wide berth at specific times of day or night in order to avoid encountering the gods thought to stalk among the trees then. Caesar urged his troops to fell the grove because it was in the way of siege-works that he wished to throw up around Massilia, a town that dared to support his political rival Pompey in the civil war. But even his hard-bitten legionaries were aghast at the notion of taking axes to the sacred trees, and it took the Roman general himself to make the first cut, heedless of such a sacrilegious act.

Lucan was by no means the only Roman writer to link groves and forests with dark Druidic practices. In his description of the sacred grove that formed the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Druids on Anglesey, Tacitus²² describes the horrific scene witnessed by the Roman army led by Suetonius Paulinus bent on razing the island's Druidic sanctuary to the ground and thereby expunging this dangerously seditious priesthood from Britannia. The Roman governor had decided that this action was essential if the fledgling province was to be successfully and permanently annexed,

so in AD 60 he left the ‘tamed’ south-east of the country and marched most of his forces to the far north-west, where he took a ship for Mona. Tacitus writes in graphic terms of the ‘black-robed women with dishevelled hair like Furies, brandishing torches’ (see Figure 6) and near them ‘Druids, raising their hands to heaven and screaming dreadful curses’.²³



FIGURE 6 Iron Age gold coin from the Rennes region, northern France, depicting an armed horsewoman. © Paul Jenkins.

Tacitus’s ‘barbarian prejudice’ shows itself further in his observation that Paulinus’s soldiers were – more than anything – unnerved by the bunch of ravening, gesticulating women that confronted them. He goes on to justify the burning of the shrine with his comment that Mona’s sacred groves contained altars steeped in the blood of captured human sacrificial victims, whose entrails were studied in divinatory rites. What Tacitus was doing here was presenting a barbaric perversion of Roman sacrificial rituals that involved animals: here, on the wild edge of the world, people were sacrificed instead of beasts.

While Pliny’s description of Druidic moon rituals involving mistletoe, oak trees and bull sacrifice contains no reference to ritual murder, he does invoke the trope of wild woodland and the magical properties of

trees and, in particular, the parasitic growths sprouting from them. These literary references to arcane religious practices associated with sacred groves in Druid-ridden Gaul and Britannia repay a moment's reflection. In his treatise on Roman law, Cicero²⁴ defined correct relationships with the gods, rituals and sacred spaces. Tellingly, he firmly stated that built temples were the appropriate holy spaces in which to venerate the gods in urban centres, but that groves were the fitting equivalent for rural areas. It is as though, for Cicero, built-up centres of population required equally formalized worshipping spaces, while dwellers in the countryside should respect nature by using naturally occurring spiritual locations. These natural sanctuaries were perhaps deemed 'porous' places, believed to possess only a fine membrane between the material and spirit-worlds, and where rural deities might feel more comfortable than being confined in human-built enclosures. Bearing Cicero's definitions in mind, it is perplexing that sacred groves should be portrayed as sinister, wild dangerous 'black holes' of dark matter when linked with Druids. It is as if, in the first century AD at least, certain Roman commentators were according Druids and groves a mutually barbarous mantle of wild otherness. And this trope of the perilous grove is taken up by the third-century AD Greek writer Dio Cassius in his description of the rebel British leader Boudica, whom he records as committing incredible atrocities, including the mastectomizing and impalement of well-born Roman women in the grove sacred to the goddess Andraste, the British goddess of Victory, in AD 60/61,²⁵ before the final pitched battle between Boudica's forces and those of Suetonius Paulinus.

Late literary nostalgia

On a certain occasion, Aurelian consulted the Druid priestesses in Gaul and enquired of them whether the imperial power would remain with his descendants, but they replied . . . that none would have a name more illustrious in the commonwealth than the descendants of Claudius.

(*SCRIPTORES HISTORIAE AUGUSTAE*, 44)²⁶

Furthermore, as he [Severus Alexander] went to war, a Druid prophetess cried out in the Gallic tongue, 'Go, but do not hope for victory, and put no trust in your soldiers'.

(*SCRIPTORES HISTORIAE AUGUSTAE*, 60)²⁷

Both these quotations come from a set of dubious late texts, the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (also known as the *Augustan Histories*), an apparent amalgam of tales by a range of authors, although possibly all from a single source. It has been dismissed as being of spurious value by many scholars, not least by Nora Chadwick.²⁸ Severus Alexander and Aurelian are not the only emperors mentioned in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* as being associated with the prophecies of Druidesses. A story about the lowly born Diocletian's rise to imperial power involved his initially hostile encounter with a Druidess in a Gallic tavern, where she accused him of parsimony due to his reluctance to pay his bar bill. Diocletian rose to the challenge, boasting to her that he would be much freer with his money when he had become emperor. The Druidess agreed that he would do so if he first murdered the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard (which presumably he did!).²⁹

So, what are we to make of these peculiar imperial predictions? Given the unreliability of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, is it wise to take any of these stories about Gallic Druidesses seriously? I suspect that the safest way to treat these anecdotes is to be sceptical about the detail, but not to dismiss the texts out of hand. The author (or authors) of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* appear to be making the point that the accession to power of these late Roman emperors was so important that even the most barbarous of religious practitioners – on the wildest edges of the known world – were involved in its prediction. The weirdness is exacerbated by the mention of not only Druids but of *female* Druids. In this context we should recall earlier documents, such as Tacitus's allusion to Anglesey's black-clad 'Furies', raging women who acted as the reception committee for Suetonius Paulinus's landing party. We will see later in this volume (Chapter Seven) that Gallic and Germanic priestesses³⁰ feature in ancient sources, as experts in divinatory rituals. But perhaps the most important aspect of the references to Druidesses in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* is that it demonstrates that the idea of Druids long lingered in the Roman mindset, remaining in the collective consciousness centuries after Rome's attempts to eradicate them, particularly during the reigns of early emperors such as Claudius and Nero. The issue, then, is to what extent did this priesthood survive *romanitas* and in what configuration?

This is where the testimony of Ausonius comes in. Decimus Magnus Ausonius, an Aquitanian academic and poet, was born in Bordeaux in the early fourth century AD, where he taught grammar and rhetoric at the University of Bordeaux and, while there, he wrote a history of education called the *Commemoratio Professorum Burdigalensium*. In this work, Ausonius refers to a priest called Phoebicius, who presided over a temple

to the Gallo-Roman solar and healer god Apollo Belenus, and who was descended from a noble line of Breton Druids. Phoebicius (his name reflecting Apollo's sobriquet 'Phoebus') himself taught at the University of Bordeaux.³¹ Ausonius records that Phoebicius was the father and grandfather of famous rhetoricians Patera and Delphidius, the latter of whom knew and probably taught Ausonius himself, as Chadwick suggests.³² The importance of this testimony lies partly in its lateness, and the consonant implication that Druids were still known about in Ausonius's time, and also because of the connection between this 'Druidic' family and the cult of Apollo Belenus. The name Delphidius is, of course, associated with the great Apolline oracular sanctuary at Delphi, and it is possible that the descendants of Druids still served the Gallo-Roman version of the solar/healer god Apollo in south-west Gaul during the later fourth century AD.

From theocrats to shamans: Druids in the mist

In 1998, the Finnish academic Juha Pentikäinen published a book about northern Eurasian shamans. The Preface begins with the dedication of the volume 'to all those 'samans' who lost their lives because of their devotion and loyalty to their shamanhood.'³³ He was referring to the purges or pogroms inflicted on Siberian Sámi shamans under the regime of Soviet Communism in the twentieth century, the nadir of 400 years of Russian opposition to shamanic communities in the north.³⁴ But Russia was by no means the only agent for anti-shamanism among northern peoples. The 'shaman's drum' was (and is) a key instrument in ritual practice and is perceived as a powerful conduit between the material and spirit worlds. In the eighteenth century, shamans' drums were systematically confiscated by Scandinavian missionaries, as being potent anti-Christian symbols. Hideously, about seventy of these drums were burned in a fire in Copenhagen in 1728,³⁵ although it is unclear whether this was by accident or design. The persecutions of shamans in the north led to their being driven into the shadows. During the Soviet purges, many shamans were imprisoned or executed in attempts to stamp out what was considered anti-Communist sedition. Those that survived were ridiculed as manifestations of primitive, uneducated, meaningless ritual, and even sometimes dismissed as insane.³⁶

I have touched briefly on northern shamanic systems here simply because I see a broad, loose link between their plight under Communism and missionary 'cleansing' and what happened to the Druids during the Roman period. Although, as mentioned earlier, late Roman authors did make references to the Druids, these may well be the result of nostalgic

and fictional back-glances to a 'noble savage' way of thinking about the past, about the time before Britain and Gaul became part of the 'civilized' world of the Roman Empire. But just as shamans survived their vicissitudes, quietly carrying on their practices of liaising with spirits and using their powers of 'soul flight' (achieved through trance)³⁷ to enter the spirit world and harness its power in order to heal the sick, so the Druids may also have remained active, albeit with a lower profile and perhaps no longer even called Druids once *romanitas* took hold.

The association between ancient Druids and modern shamans is explored further in Chapter Five. But, in the context of the late Roman period, it is worth trying to see whether any of the later texts providing clues concerning lingering Druidism might chime with archaeological testimony. I am struck by Ausonius's description of the Druidic 'family' of Phoebicius, Patera and Delphidius, which reminds me of the broadly contemporary archaeological evidence at the fourth-century AD sanctuary to the British god Nodens at Lydney in the Forest of Dean. Here, high above the great River Severn and commanding spectacular views of it, a great Classically styled temple was built. In its inner sanctum, the *cella*, where only the presiding *sacerdos* (incumbent priest) would have been permitted, a man called Titus Flavius Senilis, probably just such an official, was responsible for (and maybe paid for) a polychrome mosaic to be laid. Its aquatic imagery, swimming with marine life, seems to play homage to the wide river (see also Chapter Six). Unusually for a mosaic, it is inscribed with two names: that of Senilis, a 'superintendent of religious rites', and that of Victorinus, who was the overseer of the mosaic-laying, and this man is described on the inscription as an *interpretes*, someone who read the meaning of dreams.³⁸ Such dreams might have been those of the sick pilgrims who slept in the *abatón* (dormitory) in the hope that the god would visit them while they slept and heal them, or those of the religious officials, including Senilis and Victorinus himself who, shaman-like sent their souls to the otherworld via their dreams.³⁹ And there is another aspect to the Lydney cult of Nodens that is of possible relevance. When supplicants visited the sanctuary, they brought offerings, including several images of dogs. Maybe this animal was sacred to Nodens or maybe, as at Asklepios's great healing temple at Epidauros in the Peloponnese,⁴⁰ this creature's spittle was deemed to have curative properties. But one of the canine images at Lydney is different from all the others: it has a human face.⁴¹ Later in this book, the phenomenon of shape-shifting, both of gender and species, so crucial to modern shamanism, is considered in relation to ancient Druids. But its presence at Lydney is perhaps also

indicative of altered states of consciousness that might occur in shamanic dream-states.

Is it possible that Ausonius's Gallic Druids would have been at home in temples like Lydney and perhaps fulfilled religious functions cognate with those of Senilis and Victorinus? And is Senilis's name, 'The Old One' relevant to the story? After all, hundreds of years earlier, Julius Caesar commented on the attenuated process of learning to become a Druid.⁴² Late Druids are elusive, retreating ever further into the shadows as their power declined and changed over centuries of Roman rule. But as their overt influence waned, it is worth ruminating on whether, as occurred among Sámi shamans in modern times in Siberia and Scandinavia, the Druids of Gaul and Britain still had a voice, albeit perhaps a quiet one. It is, I think, pertinent and valid to suggest that the, perhaps clandestine and shadowy, footprints of both Druids and shamans marched alongside each other as a subtext to 'formally recognized' religion, in musical terms, a nuanced counterpoint or minor key.

Notes

¹ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13; trans. Anne and Peter Wiseman, *Julius Caesar: The Battle for Gaul* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 121.

² Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know about Global Politics* (London: Elliott and Thompson 2015), pp. 122–51.

³ *Matthew*, 2, vv. 1–2.

⁴ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 21.

⁵ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13; trans. Wiseman and Wiseman 1980, p. 121.

⁶ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14. 30–31.

⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, 30. 4.

⁸ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae Aurelianus*, 44. 4–5; *Numerianus*, 14. 2.

⁹ *Commemoratio Professorum Burdigalensis*, 1. 4, 1. 11.

¹⁰ The early medieval myths of Ireland contain innumerable references to the Druids. It is difficult to judge whether this represents a genuine lingering of Druidism or can instead be explained by the influence of Classical texts upon these myths: see, for example, Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Newnes, 1983), pp. 54–71 and 94–132; Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press 1999); J. P. Mallory, *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast: December Publications, 1992).

¹¹ For example, *Fragment*, 4. 36, p. 151E.

¹² For example, Strabo, *Geography*, 4. 1. 7.

¹³ Ian Armit, *Headhunting and the Body in Iron Age Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 77.

¹⁴ *Natural History*, 16. 95.

¹⁵ Herodian, *History*, 3. 14. 67.

- ¹⁶ *De Bello Gallico*, 1. 41.
- ¹⁷ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 1. 90. Divination and Druids are examined in Chapter Five of this volume.
- ¹⁸ *De Bello Gallico*, 1. 3.
- ¹⁹ *De Bello Gallico*, 5. 6.
- ²⁰ Lucan, *The Pharsalia*, 3. 390–6.
- ²¹ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), pp. 85–124.
- ²² Tacitus, *Annals*, 14. 30.
- ²³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 30; trans. Michael Grant, *Tacitus: The Annals of Imperial Rome* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), p. 317.
- ²⁴ Cicero, *De Legibus*, 2. 8: 'No one shall have gods to himself, either new gods or alien gods, unless recognized by the State. Privately they shall worship those gods whose worship they have duly received from their ancestors. In cities they shall have shrines; they shall have groves in the country and homes for the *Lares* (protective household spirits).'
- ²⁵ *Roman History*, 62. 6–7.
- ²⁶ Attributed to Vopiscus: *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, 44. 4–5; trans. D. Magie, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae III* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Edition, 1932), p. 283. This particular anecdote is attributed to a writer called Vopiscus.
- ²⁷ Attributed to Lampridius: *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, 60. 6; trans. D. Magie, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae II* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Edition, 1924), p. 301.
- ²⁸ *The Druids*, p. 81; E. K. Rand, *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), pp. 598 and 783.
- ²⁹ Vopiscus, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae Numerianus*, 14. 2; trans. D. Magie (1932), p. 439.
- ³⁰ As recorded, for example, in Tacitus's description of the Batavian prophetess Veleda: *Histories*, 4. 65, and Strabo's aged Cimbrian priestesses: *Geography*, 7. 2, 3.
- ³¹ Ausonius, *Commemoratio Professorum Burdigalensium*, 1. 4, 1. 11.
- ³² Chadwick, Nora, *The Druids*, 2nd edition [1997] (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), p. 82.
- ³³ Juha Pentikäinen, *Shamanism and Culture* (Tampere/Helsinki: Etnika, 1998), p. 11.
- ³⁴ Ronald Hutton, *The Shamans of Siberia* (Glastonbury: The Isle of Avalon Press, 1993), p. 7.
- ³⁵ Pentikäinen, *Shamanism and Culture*, pp. 33–4.
- ³⁶ Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman; Voyages of the Soul: Trance, Ecstasy and Healing from Siberia to the Amazon* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 136–7.
- ³⁷ For details of soul-flight, and methods of achieving 'Altered States of Consciousness', including drugs, sensory deprivation, chanting and drumming, see Vitebsky, 1995; Pentikäinen, 1998; and Miranda Aldhouse-Green and Stephen Aldhouse-Green, *The Quest for the Shaman: Shape-Shifters, Sorcerers and Spirit-Healers in Ancient Europe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

- ³⁸ Mortimer Wheeler and Tessa Wheeler, *Report on the Excavation of the Prehistoric, Roman and Post-Roman Site in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Society of Antiquaries of London, 1932), p. 65, pl. XIXA; Martin Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain* (London: Batsford, 1984), pp. 135–6.
- ³⁹ For shamanic dreams and soul-journeys, see Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman: Voyages of the Soul, Trance, Ecstasy and Healing from Siberia to the Amazon* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 12–14.
- ⁴⁰ R. A. Tomlinson, *Greek Sanctuaries* (London: Book Club Associates/Elek Press, 1976), pp. 96–103.
- ⁴¹ Miranda Green, 'Images in opposition: polarity, ambivalence and ambiguity in cult-representation', *Antiquity*, 71 (1997), 898–911. See Figure 7.
- ⁴² *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 14.

Chapter Two

BARBARIANS AND WISE MEN: RETHINKING CLASSICAL TEXTS

The god they most worship is Mercury, and they have very many images of him. They regard him as the inventor of all the arts, the guide of all their roads and journeys, and the god who has greatest power for trading and moneymaking.

After Mercury they worship Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva, having almost the same ideas about these gods as other peoples do: Apollo averts diseases, Minerva teaches the first principles of industry and crafts. Jupiter has supremacy among the gods, and Mars controls warfare.

(CAESAR, *DE BELLO GALLICO*, 6. 17)¹

Thus does Caesar comment on his perception (or at any rate, his presentation) of the Gallic pantheon. But how could this be? Caesar wrote his war diaries during his campaigns to conquer Gaul in the mid-first century BC so, at that time, the Gallic people could not possibly have become so intimately familiar with the State gods of Rome. So, what was Caesar talking about? Were his queries concerning cultic matters here greeted with a wall of silence? Bearing in mind that the ‘audience’ for his war diaries would have consisted largely of the senate and the *cognoscenti* of Rome, was he trying to explain and simplify the native ‘pantheon’ he encountered in terms explicable to his readership? Was Caesar indulging in *interpretatio romana*, a practice more clearly evident in Tacitus’s treatise the *Germania*, where, writing in the second century AD, he described a Teutonic tribe called the Naharvali, in whose sacred grove ‘the gods, translated into Latin, are Castor and Pollux. That expresses the character of the gods, but their [Germanic] name is Alci’.² A stark contrast to the comments on ‘barbarian’ deities made by Caesar and Tacitus is the observation made by the epic poet Lucan, who wrote of ‘those Gauls who propitiate with human sacrifices the merciless gods Teutas, Esus and Taranis’.³ These three Gaulish-named deities are revisited later in this volume (see Figures 7 and 8).



FIGURE 7 Stone altar dedicated to Taranucus (Taranis), from Böckingen, Germany. © Württembergisches Landesmuseum, Stuttgart.



FIGURE 8 Inscribed stone carving of Esus, from the *Nautes Parisiaca* Jupiter-column, Paris. © Paul Jenkins.

To what extent, then, were these three chroniclers telling the truth about the religion of conquered and about to be conquered communities as they saw (and heard) it? What kind of manipulation may have been going on and for what purpose? In order to try and understand these and related problems, it is necessary to dig deep into the psyche of foreign reporting and to ask searching questions concerning its knowledge-base, authenticity and understanding.

Sacred states: theocracies and religious hierarchies in Gaul and Britain

Of all the Graeco-Roman writers who described the gods, priesthoods and rituals of 'barbarian' peoples outside or on the edge of the Roman Empire, Julius Caesar's testimony may have had the firmest foundation. I say this simply because he lived among the Gauls for nearly a decade. That is not to say that he did not embroider or tweak events, the outcomes of battles and his own military skills in order to present himself in the best possible light. But his comments on the Druids could not have been fraudulent in essence, at least partly because Caesar had educated, well-connected officers with him in Gaul, notably Quintus Cicero, brother of the prominent senator Marcus Tullius Cicero. And men like these would have been in a strong position to 'pull the plug' on any outrageous elements of reporting on the Gallic Wars in *De Bello Gallico*, and to have made vigorous rebuttals of falsehoods therein. But Lucan, too, has veracity, for archaeological testimony backs up the existence of all three of the Gallic gods mentioned in the *Pharsalia*. A small amount of physical evidence for all of them exists in Britain and Gaul, in the form of inscribed stones and small metal objects. For instance, a military officer dedicated an altar to Taranis in the legionary fortress at Chester;⁴ Teutates is represented on a little silver plaque from Barkway (Hertfordshire)⁵ and Esus' name is inscribed on a stone pillar dedicated to Jupiter in Paris, by a guild of boatmen in the reign of Tiberius.⁶

If we are to believe Caesar, the Druids enjoyed extremely high rank within Gaulish society, rubbing shoulders with the ruling classes, even – like Caesar's Aeduan friend Diviciacus – sometimes combining religious and political leadership. But to what extent was Caesar writing from a model of late Roman Republicanism? Roman society was a highly stratified pyramid with the two consuls at the top. Alongside this political structure were the priests, of whom some, such as the *Pontifex Maximus* (High Priest), wielded enormous power. Indeed, Caesar himself held this office and used

his religious influence to further his political career.⁷ If Caesar was interpreting Gallic society, at least partly, through a Roman Republican lens and through personal experience of its structure, then just as he may have adjusted his reportage of the Gallic pantheon, so might he have presented the Gallic politico-religious system. For him, Druids perhaps fitted into his notions of how priests worked in his own experience of hierarchical structures at home. Caesar's presentation of a Gallic theocracy, where nothing of political importance could occur without the gods' (through the priests') agreement, was a scenario to which the educated classes in Rome were accustomed. Divination (interpreting the will of the gods by ritual means) played a key role in high-octane politics in Rome; according to Caesar, this conduit to establishing the will of the gods had its close parallel in the arcane system of Druidism that cast its net so widely as to embrace the whole of Gaul.⁸

Problems with Posidonius

Posidonius, in the twenty-third book of his *Histories*, said: 'The Celts sometimes engage in single combat at dinner. Assembling in arms they engage in a mock battle-drill, and mutual thrust and parry, but sometimes wounds are inflicted, and the irritation caused by this may lead even to the slaying of the opponent unless the bystanders hold them back.' (Athenaeus IV.40.)⁹

Posidonius was born at Apamea on the river Orontes in Syria in about 135 BC. He was a Stoic philosopher who settled on the island of Rhodes and visited Rome in 87 BC. He was a polymath, with varied academic interests, and his *Histories* cover a range of 'ethnographic' material about customs and practices in lands far from his home, particularly pertaining to northern Europe. His testimony survives only in fragments and, furthermore, the writings of his contemporaries have largely vanished, thereby making it impossible to make comparisons in reportage. Most problematical of all is that Posidonius writes with the persuasiveness of ethnographic authenticity, seducing his readers into believing that he himself visited all the areas and peoples whose customs he described in vivid detail. Many other writers, including Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and the later author Athenaeus (quoted above), mention Posidonius as their source for information concerning Gaul, and Diodorus and Strabo appear to have used his testimony in their observations of Gallic religion and ritual, including Druidism.

Recent research into Posidonius's autoptical or forensic way of writing (and thus also of his literary followers) has shed new, critical light on its

authenticity. Greg Woolf has argued with conviction that Classical writers of foreign 'ethnographies' were heavily biased by templates or tropes that they and their public expected of 'others' – the foreign, the barbarous and the uncivilized.¹⁰ Antti Lampinen has built upon such recent thinking, presenting a detailed critique of Posidonius as a forensic reporter, pointing out the lack of firm evidence that he travelled widely, at least any further into Gaul than the far south.¹¹ Instead, Posidonius's writing needs to be approached within the context of his own background and the influence of his literary antecedents. Ancient observers of the world beyond the shores of the Mediterranean were caught up in the 'weird and the wonderful' and 'the enhanced thrill of the unfamiliar'.¹² Posidonius himself was influenced in part by his own background as a Stoic philosopher. The backbone of Stoicism was a deeply moralistic outlook on life and how people ought to conduct themselves in a civilized society. Posidonius's perception of outsiders may well have involved a projection of the 'other' as an inversion or opposite of Classical civilization. Another important factor in judging the authenticity of Posidonius and his fellow commentators on Gaul (and Britannia), may have been the imposition, on ideas of the foreign, of familiar tropes born of Homeric, Hellenistic and other Greek literature. A clear example of this kind of thing appears in Athenaeus's comments on feasting squabbles (see quote above), and the competition for the 'champion's portion', which, as Lampinen puts it,¹³ are themes that contain a distinct whiff of Homer.

Diodorus and the Druids

The historian Diodorus Siculus, of Agyrium in central Sicily, has a fair amount to say about the Druids and ritual practices in Gaul, citing Posidonius as a major source for his observations. He referred to 'certain philosophers and theologians who are treated with special honour, whom they call Druids'. He makes a distinction between Druids and people that he called 'seers', the latter being particularly praiseworthy for their divinatory powers.¹⁴ One instance of their predictive rituals, he reported, involved human sacrifice, which entailed stabbing a victim and telling the will of the gods from the nature of his collapse, the jerk of his body and the gush of blood.¹⁵ Diodorus's other major revelation (although he does not specifically connect it to the Druids) was that the Gauls followed the Pythagorean belief in reincarnation.¹⁶ Despite his allusion to Posidonius as his named source, it is apparent from his treatment of the Druids that Diodorus was making use of his broad contemporary Julius Caesar, who

also mentioned human sacrifice and rebirth. Furthermore, Diodorus's comment that 'their [the Gauls'] custom is that no none should offer a sacrifice without a philosopher'¹⁷ is almost identical to Caesar's assertion that 'the Druids have control over public and private sacrifices, and give rulings on all religious questions'.¹⁸ So it is perhaps rather more likely that Diodorus trawled Caesar's war diaries for his information on the Druids and other Gaulish matters than Posidonius. Indeed, it is apparent from his writings that Diodorus was thoroughly familiar with Caesar's battle commentaries. Whilst the fragmentary and non-corroborative nature of the latter's writings carries doubts as to authenticity (as argued above), Caesar's work has a firmer forensic foundation because of his experiences as a commander in Gaul.

Seeing through Classical lenses: clarity, distortion and 'fake news'

In judging the authenticity of ancient texts concerning regions foreign to their authors – and particularly, I would suspect – with regard to religious matters, it is important to attempt some understanding of how such information would have been received. Caesar's testimony may possess autoptical credence because of his personal experience of Gaul and his undoubted relationship with certain high-ranking people such as Diviciacus. However, it is prudent to consider whether or not he would have been told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth when making enquiries about belief systems.

Weird women

The treatment of 'barbarian' women and – in particular – religious women in Classical texts is revealing in their emphasis on the strange edginess of their imagery in Gaul and Britannia. An example of this was touched upon in Chapter One in the description of the Gallic Druidesses who were said (in the *Augustan Histories*) to predict future emperors in the third century AD. The picture painted by Dio Cassius in his treatment of the mid-first century AD British freedom fighter Boudica is very telling, as he describes her as the very antithesis of Roman womanhood: tall and massively built, with a harsh, 'masculine' voice and a great mane of tawny-red hair.¹⁹ According to him, she wore a 'multi-coloured' tunic (plaid, perhaps) and thick cloak, and round her neck was a heavy gold neck-ring. She carried a spear, rode a chariot and led an army of 120,000 men (see Figure 9).



FIGURE 9 Stained-glass image of Boudica (Boadicea) on the Queen's Window in Colchester Town Hall. © Author; by permission of Colchester Town Council.

We need to bear in mind the time-distance between the 'real' Boudica of the mid-first century AD and Dio, who hailed from Bithynia in Asia Minor and wrote his *Roman History* in the third century AD. Dio goes on to emphasize Boudica's otherness in describing her outrageous behaviour in the sacred grove of the British goddess of Victory, Andraste in Londinium. Dio records how she practised a form of divinatory ritual here, releasing a hare secreted in the folds of her tunic and proclaiming her forthcoming victory by seeing in which direction it ran. Thereafter she 'sacrificed' well-born Roman women by skewering them, cutting off their breasts and sewing them into their mouths, as if to represent auto-cannibalism.²⁰ Where was Dio getting his information? Was he trawling a source since lost, or was he embroidering the terse story told by Tacitus, laying layer upon layer of barbarism onto the persona of this powerful British enemy of the Roman state?

It is important to remember that Boudica's rebellion almost lost Britannia to Nero and the Empire.²¹ Her name must have sent shivers down Roman spines long after her death. And she is by no means the only foreign woman to shake the Empire to its foundations. A century earlier,

a certain notorious Egyptian queen, Cleopatra, tore the Empire in half by casting her amorous spells first over Julius Caesar and then Mark Antony. The names of both these female opponents of Roman power remained long as foci of hatred and fear of the ‘other’ in Roman memory. Myths and ‘fake news’ tend to weave around prominent people, especially – perhaps – those who challenge the system. There is no need to point to obvious parallels in contemporary Western political life.

Cleopatra and Boudica were depicted by their chroniclers through the lens of the ‘Roman gaze’.²² This way of seeing can be tracked as a vein of ‘otherness’ in many Classical texts concerning barbarians on the fringes of the known world. Women sometimes come in for particular attention, as though to emphasize the opposite of the social order so dear to Graeco-Roman thinking, the *nomos* (civilized order) so clearly explored in, for example, Euripides’ tragic drama *The Bacchae*, where *nomos* is pitted against its opposite *physis* (chaos, disorder), and where men represent the former and women (and animals) the latter.²³ The Greek geographer Strabo and the Roman historian Tacitus each make detailed reference to sacred women belonging to northern peoples: the Cimbri and the Batavians respectively. Strabo’s account of Cimbrian priestesses embraces the barbarism of otherness in its extremist form. There is an important context here, because of the so-called ‘Cimbric *tumultus*’.²⁴ The Romans cherished a deep and abiding memory of this fearsome northern tribe, whose territory lay in what is now southern Denmark and the far north of Germany. Many Classical writers record the several defeats inflicted on the Roman army by this northern people in the late second century BC, culminating in the Battle of Arausio (present-day Orange in the Lower Rhône Valley) in 105 BC, where they comprehensively routed their Roman adversaries.²⁵ It is against this backdrop that we should view Strabo’s reportage of Cimbrian priestesses whom he describes vividly as grey with age but clad in shining white robes, entering the army camp wielding swords with which they slit the throats of prisoners of war, catching their blood in a cauldron and cutting their bodies open in order to divine the future through examination of their innards and predict Cimbrian victory.²⁶

Cornelius Tacitus’s presentation of the Batavian priestess Veleda has a very different flavour but, nonetheless, it is overlain by his background as an educated Roman, a senator, high up the political scaffolding of imperial power. His *Histories* were probably written in the very late first or early second centuries AD, and one episode with which he dealt in detail is the rebellion of Julius Civilis in AD 69, who led a Gallic confederacy in a massive bid to shrug off the Roman yoke during the turbulent time known as the Year

of the Four Emperors, when several men laid claim to the imperial purple after the death of Nero. Civilis was a high-ranking agitator who belonged to the Batavii, a Germanic tribe whose lands lay in the Rhine Delta (in the south of what is now the Netherlands). He was a ‘romanized’ nobleman but chafed under the yoke of provincial status and chose his moment, during the chaos of the struggle for imperial power, to whip up sedition against Rome.²⁷ What is of interest in the present context is Tacitus’s description of the part in Civilis’ revolt played by his countrywoman, the virgin priestess Veleda. According to Tacitus, she was an ‘unmarried’ woman who enjoyed great reverence among her own and neighbouring Rhenish peoples because of her skills in prophecy. Apparently, these tribes even considered such gifted women as goddesses. But in a counterpoint to the recognition of Veleda’s powers, she was sequestered in a high tower, guarded by her relatives, prevented from communicating directly with her people, her unintelligible prophetic utterances being translated and relayed to her audience by one of her male relatives (see Figure 10).



FIGURE 10 Reconstruction of Veleda’s tower. © Anne Leaver.

In the contexts of barbarization and vision through Classical lenses, Tacitus's description of Veleda is significant on several levels. Her unmarried status might be interpreted as widowhood, but it is more likely that she was a virgin. In Roman religion the Vestal Virgins, who guarded the sacred and ever-living flame of Vesta, were committed to a chaste life until they retired. They wore white to symbolize their purity and dreadful punishment (burial alive) was meted out to any maiden who strayed. But their celibacy also conferred on them a certain element of gender neutrality: they were granted particular 'male' privileges, including the right to conduct business in their own right.²⁸ Their virginity, like Veleda's single status, set them apart and allowed them to transgress traditional gender-boundaries. But the latter's sequestration and, that her prophetic words could be relayed only by a man, indicate that she was still under male domination. And Tacitus might not only have drawn on his knowledge of the Vestals. The renowned Sibyl of Cumae, as described in Virgil's *Aeneid*, was considered a paramount prophetess, yet she was totally under the control of the masculine god Apollo.²⁹ Veleda was placed away from her public in a high tower, while the Cumaean Sibyl dwelt similarly apart, in a deep, dark cave. So while Veleda may well have been an actual Germanic priestess, skilled in prophecy, Tacitus's presentation of her may well be painted with a Classical brush. He may have projected her image as one to which his urbane, educated Roman readership or audience could easily relate, as well as adding a layer of northern barbarism to the mix. The sequestration of Veleda (and the Cumaean Sibyl) might be given a further twist. Could it be that these holy women, who had the ear of the gods, were so charged with spiritual energy that, like hot flames, they had to be shielded from the general population – as a kind of quarantine – lest they did them harm?

The human sacrifice question

The Gallic people as a whole are extremely superstitious. Consequently, people suffering from serious illnesses, and people involved in the dangers of battle, make or promise to make, human sacrifice; the Druids officiate at such sacrifices.

(CAESAR, *DE BELLO GALLICO*, 6. 16)³⁰

If the Roman gaze dwelt with disapproval upon wild women of the barbarian north, this pejorative attitude was ratcheted up all the more when the gaze fell upon the practice of ritual murder. Human sacrifice was by no means unfamiliar to the Roman historians who chronicled the cult

practices of Gaul and Britannia. In Rome, such events were always rare, and were carried out only in response to deep crises, but it was made illegal only by the emperor Augustus.³¹ Notable examples were associated with the Punic Wars in the third century BC, when Rome was threatened not just by Carthage but also by the throngs of Gallic mercenaries who threw in their lot with the Phoenicians. In 228 BC, in a desperate act of aversion sacrifice, two gendered pairs, each of Greeks and Gauls, were buried alive in the Roman Forum Boarium,³² at the direction of the Sibylline Books, texts containing the prophecies of the Cumaean Sibyl. These books consisted of written oracles kept in Rome said to represent the utterances of Apollo's prophetess, and probably date to the sixth century BC.³³

So, most classical texts that dealt with northern foreigners on or beyond the borders of the Empire condemn human sacrifice as the quintessence of savage barbarism and, of course, their treatment of the Druids was heavily tainted by their perceived association with such rites. Once again, the testimony of Julius Caesar provides the least pejorative source (see the Caesar quote above), commenting dispassionately on the belief that Gallic gods demanded ritual murder and describing quite prosaically the horrific custom of building giant wicker men, filling them with sacrificial victims and burning them to the ground (see Figure 11).



FIGURE 11 Re-enactment of burning a wicker man, Anglesey, December 2019, for Smithsonian Television series *Mystic Britain*. © Blink Films.

He comments that the preferred candidates for human sacrifice were condemned criminals, but that innocent people might also suffer such a fate if the supply of miscreants dried up. Of course, as observed earlier in this chapter, in the testimony of other writers, such as Diodorus, Lucan and Tacitus, this practice is presented with far more abhorrence than in Caesar's commentary. It is not improbable that, as the Druids' threat factor increased during the annexation of Gaul and then Britannia, so factual reportage was seasoned with a hefty dose of 'fake news'. And human sacrifice became a mighty stick with which to beat Druids as arch-perpetrators.

On 7 October 2019, I took part in a television programme for the Smithsonian Channel, in the series *Mystic Britain*. The theme was the destruction of the Druidic stronghold on Anglesey by Suetonius Paulinus in AD 60, as recounted by Tacitus.³⁴ One sequence involved some experimental archaeology, including the construction of a wicker man (following Caesar's testimony). Our figure was life-size, by no means big enough to hold one person, let alone several. Our aim was to place him on the beach facing across the Menai Strait towards where the Roman army would have embarked on their mission of sacrilege and devastation, and then to burn him. It was a dry but windy day, and our efforts to set him alight failed initially. But later that evening the wind dropped and, as it got dark, he was lit and went up in flames, making a dramatic spectacle. If Caesar was reporting correctly, the construction of a giant wicker image would have been quite difficult, involving a fair number of participants. Keeping it steady and upright would probably have involved some form of scaffolding and, of course, ingress into the body of the image had to be provided for sacrificial victims. Wicker effigies are inherently unstable in windy conditions. The weight of the people inside would have helped but they would have to have been drugged or restrained to avoid the whole edifice toppling over. And if theatre was important, the fire in the darkness of night would have been so much more effective and terrifying to the watchers on the north Welsh shore.³⁵ So, making and burning wicker men is, in practice, much more complicated than Caesar's bland statement would suggest.

Anthropological perspectives

Hiding the arcane

The French anthropologist Marcel Griaule lived and worked among the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa, mapping and recording many aspects of their culture, including their belief systems and ritual practices. His

seminal work *Dieu d'Eau*³⁶ was published in 1948, eight years before his death. It was the result of many conversations with the elders of Mali who, like the ancient Druids, are keepers of tradition, memory and ancestral teaching. When the anthropologist first started asking questions of these elders about Dogon belief systems, he was treated as a religious novice, able to understand only the bare minimum of information about the complexities of cult, the gods, belief and ritual. Their answers to him, then, were guarded because he was a beginner, an outsider, not fit for or capable of grasping anything deeper. But later, once he was both trusted and perceived to understand basic tenets, deeper religious mysteries were revealed to him.³⁷ I have already made a broad link between Griaule's experiences in Mali and the initiation of novices into the Roman Catholic Church.³⁸ This chapter opened with a detailed description by Julius Caesar of the Gallic pantheon, comfortably wrapped in the familiar blanket of *romanitas*.

If Caesar really did record what he observed from discussions with such high-ranking religious officials as his Aeduan ally Diviciacus and the latter's less-than-friendly brother, Dumnorix, would it not make sense that these two – or other local cognoscenti – carefully regulated the information sought by a Roman commander in process of subjugating the whole of Gaul? Indeed, it might be prescient to go further than regulation and to suggest a modicum of invention. And who would have been better placed to feed false or massaged information to Caesar than someone like Diviciacus who, on evidence from Cicero, visited Rome in 60 BC? And what about Dumnorix, a nationalist agitator who wanted no truck with Rome? Might he not have deliberately steered Caesar away from the intricacies of arcane Druidism and secret local deities?

Shamans in shadow

On 20 September 2019, *The Times* published a report entitled 'Shaman arrested on way to exorcise Putin'. Alexander Gabyshev was detained during a raid at his camp in the east of Siberia, by night, and detained by armed police, who undertook to escort him back to his home in Yakutia. The shaman had pledged to walk 4,000 miles to Moscow, pulling behind him a cart containing all his possessions, including his tent, in order to use his spiritual powers to cleanse Russia from 'the demon' Vladimir Putin by exorcizing him. Cheered along his way by hundreds of supporters, his aim was to reach the Kremlin in 2021. We cannot know whether it is pertinent to consider Druids to be shamans (at least in the original meaning of the Evenki Sámi term) but modern northern shamans³⁹ share with the

Druids the capacity to make direct contact with the spirits of the other world and liaise with them in order to enact spiritual cleansing and healing to their communities. *The Times* article⁴⁰ is of especial interest because of the broad analogy that can be made between the overkill retribution meted out to spiritual leaders by the 'establishment', be it represented by Rome or Russia. It is extraordinary that one middle-aged man, dragging behind him his few belongings and trudging alone through thousands of miles of wilderness, should be considered a sufficient threat as to warrant his detention. Behind this, as behind Rome's attitude to the Druids, was, perhaps, the fear that one person, or a few, might be capable of incendiary large numbers of traditional peoples who wished to preserve their ancient beliefs and practices in the face of the monolith of communism or *romanitas*.

The first two chapters of this book have focused on the nature of the contribution to ancient Druidic studies made by Graeco-Roman commentaries, what pitfalls lie in the paths of the unwary and how necessary it is to scrutinize pattern and purpose when it comes to reportage on foreign customs by foreigners. While the remainder of the book by no means abandons Classical texts – because they do have value and relevance – it is time now to put archaeological evidence into play and consider to what extent it elides with, elucidates or conflicts with the Classical literary image of the Druids.

Notes

- ¹ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 17; trans. Anne Wiseman and T. P. Wiseman, *Julius Caesar: The Battle for Gaul* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 123.
- ² Tacitus, *Germania*, 43; trans. H. Mattingly, *Tacitus on Britain and Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), p. 136.
- ³ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 1. 422–65; trans. Robert Graves, *Lucan Pharsalia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), p. 38.
- ⁴ M. J. Green, 'Tanarus, Taranis and the Chester Altar', *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society*, 65 (1982), 37–44.
- ⁵ British Museum, *A Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1922), p. 34, fig. 25.
- ⁶ Miranda Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 103, fig. 44; Paul-Marie Duval, *Paris Antique* (Paris: Hermann, 1961), pp. 197–9.
- ⁷ Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, 'Julius Caesar', in *The Twelve Caesars*, 13; trans. Robert Graves, *The Twelve Caesars* (London: Cassell, 1962), p. 5.
- ⁸ As suggested by Caesar's description of the annual Druidic Assembly that took place in the territory of the Carnutes, 'supposed to be the centre of the whole country of Gaul' (*De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13; trans. Wiseman and Wiseman, p. 121).

- ⁹ Athenaeus IV 40, p. 154A–C; after J. J. Tierney, ‘The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 (1959–60), 189–276, 247.
- ¹⁰ Greg Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians* (Oxford: Wiley/Blackwell, 2014).
- ¹¹ A. Lampinen, ‘Fragments from the ‘Middle Ground’ – Posidonius’ Northern Ethnography’, *Arctos*, 48 (2014), 229–59.
- ¹² Lampinen, 249.
- ¹³ Lampinen, 235.
- ¹⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5. 31. 2–3, trans. Tierney, 1959–60, p. 251.
- ¹⁵ Diodorus Siculus, 5. 31. 3; trans. Tierney, 1959–60, p. 251.
- ¹⁶ Diodorus Siculus, 5. 31. 6; trans. Tierney, 1959–60, p. 250.
- ¹⁷ Diodorus Siculus, 5. 31. 4; trans. Tierney, 1959–60, p. 251.
- ¹⁸ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13; trans. Wiseman and Wiseman, p.121.
- ¹⁹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 62. 2.
- ²⁰ *Roman History*, 62. 6–7.
- ²¹ For detail on the Boudican revolt, see Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Boudica Britannia* (London: Pearson Longman, 2006).
- ²² Lampinen, 255.
- ²³ Euripides, *The Bacchae, and other plays*; trans. Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin, 1954), pp. 191–244.
- ²⁴ Lampinen, 255.
- ²⁵ Livy, *Epitomes*, 63, 65; Sallust, *The Jugurthine War*, 114.
- ²⁶ Strabo, *Geography*, 7. 2, 3.
- ²⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, 4. 13. It appears that Civilis had already had a brush with Rome as a freedom fighter, and had been taken in chains to appear before Nero. His name, Julius Civilis, suggests that he may have enjoyed Roman citizen status and, as I have suggested elsewhere, he may even have been a client king of Rome, employed to keep the peace in his tribal region in exchange for Roman patronage: Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar’s Druids* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 92.
- ²⁸ Plutarch, *Life of Numa*, 9–10; John Ferguson, *Greek and Roman Religion: A Source Book* (Park Ridge NJ: Noyes Press, 1980), pp. 57–8; M. J. Green, ‘Images in opposition: polarity, ambivalence and liminality in cult representation’, *Antiquity*, 71, 274, (December 1997), 898–911. The punishment for Vestals who broke their oath of chastity was live entombment with a little oil and water, to await a lonely, lingering death from starvation in the dark.
- ²⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6. 75–80; Kitty Chisholm and John Ferguson, *Rome the Augustan Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/The Open University, 1981), p. 227.
- ³⁰ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 16.
- ³¹ Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 233–4.
- ³² Plutarch, *Life of Marcellus*, 3.
- ³³ Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume 2, A Source Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 23.
- ³⁴ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14. 30.

- ³⁵ This film was made for the Smithsonian Channel by Blink Films, London. Its first screening was on 23 June 2020.
- ³⁶ For example, Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (originally published as *Dieu d'eau*) (Paris: Fayard, 1948).
- ³⁷ William Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 103.
- ³⁸ Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids*, p. 34.
- ³⁹ The term 'shaman' or 'saman' is a Tungus word in a language spoken by a number of Siberian peoples: Ronald Hutton, *The Shamans of Siberia* (Glastonbury: Avalon Press, 1993), p. 10; Juha Pentikäinen, *Shamanism and Culture* (Tampere/Helsinki: Etnika, 1998), p. 11.
- ⁴⁰ T. Parfitt, 'Shaman arrested on way to exorcise Putin', *The Times*, Friday 20 September 2019, 37.

Chapter Three

SPIRITUAL SPACES: RITES AND BELIEFS
IN IRON AGE BRITAIN AND GAUL

A deep, deep cave there was, its mouth enormously gaping,
Shingly, protected by the dark lake and the forest gloom:
Above it, no winged creatures could ever wing their way
With impunity. So lethal was the miasma which
Went fuming up from its black throat to the vault of heaven:
Wherefore the Greeks called it Avernus, the Birdless Place.
(VIRGIL, *AENEID*, 6)¹

The axe-men came on an ancient and sacred grove. Its interlacing branches enclosed a cool central space into which the sun never shone, but where an abundance of water spouted from dark springs . . . the barbaric gods worshipped here had their altars heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was sprinkled with human blood. According to the local tradition, no birds ventured to perch upon these trees, and no wild beast made his lair beneath them.

(LUCAN, *THE PHARSALIA*, 3)²

Natural sanctuaries

There is a striking similarity between Virgil's description of the entrance to Hades to which Aeneas journeyed in order to find his dead father, Anchises, in the underworld, and Lucan's account of the Gallic sacred grove encountered by Caesar's army in the vicinity of Marseille. Both were natural spaces charged with such potent spiritual energy that they were too toxic for birds and beasts to tolerate. Both the cave and the grove were dark, separate places, ordained as the gods' domain, full of peril for all living creatures, including people. And, importantly, both were natural places – a cave and a grove – with no human-made structures that might leave traces in the archaeological record. However, caves may be used for

ritual actions that may leave ‘footprints’ and, occasionally, it even possible to identify artificial sacred groves. Richard Bradley³ discusses the issues and problems associated with trying to understand natural sacred space archaeologically, his study ranging from a Sámi sacrificial cave in northern Finland to caves, rock-shelters and high mountain places in Minoan and Classical Crete.⁴

Caves and groves have another significant feature in common: darkness. It is a small leap of faith to interpret such lightless places as evocative or representative of the underworld, the realms of the dead and dark divine forces. They are edgy, porous places, at the boundaries between the material and otherworld dimensions. Such marginality is beautifully described in Robert Macfarlane’s book *Underland*. One chapter, entitled ‘The Red Dancers’,⁵ discusses a remote Bronze Age painted cave on the shore of Moskenes Island, part of the Lofoten archipelago off the north-west coast of Norway. The cave is called Kollhellaren (‘The Hole of Hell’). It is perilous to access, by precipitous mountain peaks or by seas with vicious whirlpool currents, and the Bronze Age artists who painted the cave walls risked their lives to reach the site. Deep inside the cave, in total darkness, lit only by tallow lamps, these artists painted dancing figures in red ochre and, as they were drawn, the images would appear to be moving in the flickering lamplight. As in other Scandinavian Bronze Age rock-art sites, there were handprints too, as if the living were trying to penetrate the otherworld behind the walls of stone. Why were these paintings made here, in such an inhospitable environment? Surely the only plausible answer is a need to get close to the spirit world beyond. And why were dancers portrayed? Dancing suggests music, and sound can be a powerful transformative medium.⁶ Images of sacred dancers are by no means uncommon in Iron Age Europe. The back of the sixth century BC funeral couch belonging to the Hallstatt warrior buried at Hochdorf, Germany was decorated with pairs of warriors in a ritualized combat-dance.⁷ A sacred hoard of figurines found at Neuvy-en-Sullias (Loiret), probably originally from a shrine but hidden away by priests, perhaps even Druids, at the time of the Roman invasion of Gaul, included naked male and female dancers.⁸

Macfarlane’s subterranean dancers resonate with some Iron Age sacred spaces. The Culver Hole cave, on the Gower peninsula of south-west Wales was mentioned in the Prologue to this book. The little figurine of a goddess wearing a lunate headdress, placed here perhaps at the dawn of the British Iron Age, is not dancing, but she is lighting the darkness of the cave. And in the Roman period, many centuries after she was deposited here, another individual or group of people brought a second little female

image to deposit here, in this special place, that of a mother suckling her twin babies. We can only speculate on the reasons for the placement of these figurines in the Gower cave. But perhaps what impelled people to bring them was not so very different from the urge to paint figures in the far northern Bronze Age: both Moskenes and Culver Hole would have been perceived to be on the edges of the world and perhaps such ‘thin’ places were deemed especially receptive to contact with the gods (see Figure 12).

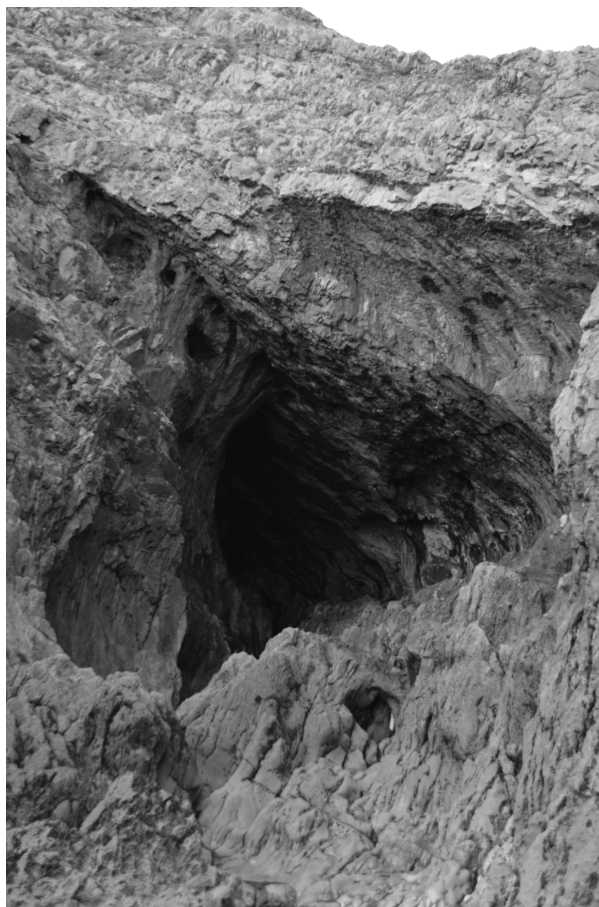


FIGURE 12 ‘Smugglers’ Cave’, near Culver Hole, Port Eynon, South Gower, showing how Culver Hole Cave (where the figurines were found) might have looked before it was walled-up to make a dovecote in the early modern period. © Derek Dye.

Before leaving cave-world and its shuttered seclusion, it is worth making reference to another kind of dark, sacred space; that of ‘underground’. And given Caesar’s comments about the significance of night to the Gauls,⁹ it is right to consider such spaces as being of particular concern to the Druids. In about 180 BC, a community on the Island of Skye descended deep underground at Uamh An Ard Achadh (High Pasture Cave) to a cavern through which flows a subterranean stream. Votive objects were left for the gods in this dark, inaccessible place, and among the gifts deposited was the antler-made bridge for a lyre.¹⁰ I am irresistibly reminded of a comment by Diodorus Siculus that Gallic Bards sang to the accompaniment of ‘instruments resembling lyres’.¹¹ And the notes of such an instrument would have made a haunting sound that echoed from the cave walls and added to the music of the stream.

Whispering groves

Can it ever be possible to identify sacred groves archaeologically? Like caves, these are natural spaces but, unlike caves, their human footprint is barely detectable. However, very occasionally, it is possible to make tentative identifications of constructed facsimiles of close-planted trees, perhaps designed to imitate natural groves. Such artificial ‘forests’ might explain an archaeological phenomenon in which either deliberate close-planting of trees or the erection of ‘forests’ of great timber uprights in Iron Age contexts may be cautiously identified. The massive multi-ring timber structure, consisting of 200 oak posts, erected on top of a small drumlin at Navan Fort in Co. Armagh in the early first century BC, encased in stone and then ceremonially burned, might well have been intended to represent a sacred grove.¹² Nearby, the small lake of Loughnashade, was a repository for votive treasures, including four superbly made bronze ceremonial trumpets, of which only one survives (see Figure 13), its mouth decorated with flowing La Tène designs (see Chapter Four).¹³

Far away, at Bliesbruck in the Mosel Valley, investigation of an Iron Age site revealed 100 pits filled with votive gifts and some containing evidence that timber uprights had been ‘planted’ as if to replicate a clump of living trees.¹⁴ And might a similar ritual act have taken place at Lowbury Hill in Oxfordshire, where a series of regularly spaced scoops hollowed out of the chalk appear to represent the construction of an artificial sacred grove in the first century AD. Later in the Roman period, a shrine was built here and a woman’s body was interred. Hers was no ordinary death and burial, for her facial bones had been carefully excised, perhaps indicative of her sacrificial killing.¹⁵ And could it be that the great ceremonial enclosure

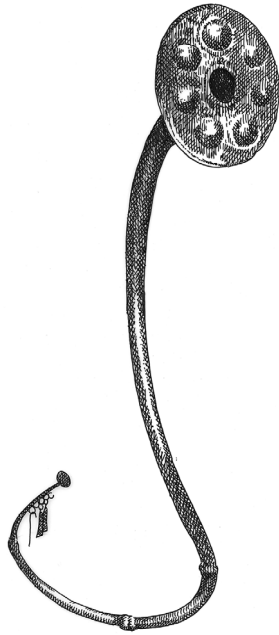


FIGURE 13 Late Iron Age bronze trumpet from Loughnashade, Co. Armagh. © Paul Jenkins.

erected at Fison Way, Thetford in the 50s AD, with its serried ranks of timber palisades, also represented an artificial sacred grove? This was a site charged with symbolism, built in the territory of the Iceni, the land of Boudica and at the heart of her great rebellion against Rome in AD 60.¹⁶

Sacred groves, as mentioned by so many Classical writers in relation to Druids, were by no means exclusive to them or to Gaul and Britain. For Cicero, writing about Roman religion in Italy, groves were the correct rural forms of sanctuary, while urban worshippers should pray to the gods within built temples.¹⁷ But according to Lucan, the Massilian grove encountered by Caesar's army was rippling with sentient menace, the trees themselves able to move independently of the wind, driven by the spirit forces that lurked therein. I am reminded of a chapter in Macfarlane's *Underland*, in which he discusses the 'under storey' of Epping Forest, and the recent research on the ability of trees to communicate with each other via their roots, connected by fungal networks.¹⁸ For the Druids and their communities, groves were crackling with power and Lucan's grove was so highly charged that even the priests hardly dared to enter it.¹⁹

Holy water

[T]he country being rich in gold, with inhabitants both god-fearing and of frugal life, possessed treasures in many parts of Celtica; and the lakes in particular provided inviolability for their treasures, into which they let down heavy masses of silver and gold. In Toulouse, moreover . . . the treasure there was unusually large since many made dedications and none would dare to profane them.

(STRABO, *GEOGRAPHY*, 4. 13)²⁰

Here Strabo was describing ritual customs among the south-western Gallic tribe of the Tectosages. He does not make specific reference to the Druids but the image he paints of sacred lakes, guarded by the spirits, and to which people came to deposit valuable gifts to the gods, chimes with archaeological evidence in the so-called ‘Druidic regions’ of western Europe. The custom of deliberate deposition in watery contexts appears to have been widespread in Iron Age Gaul and Britain. The great ‘type-site’ of La Tène on the shores of Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland yielded a huge assemblage of Iron Age metalwork, including decorated martial gear, many of the objects apparently cast into the lake-water from a wooden bridge. The assemblage can be dated to around 200 BC, and included some older, perhaps curated, material (see Figure 14).

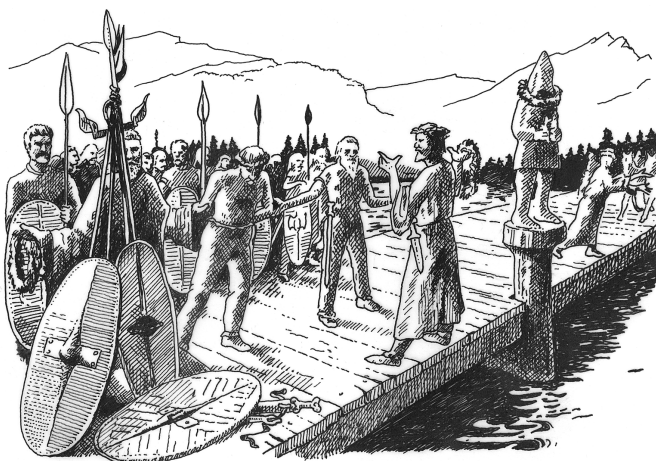


FIGURE 14 Reconstruction of Iron Age sacrificial scene at La Tène, Switzerland. © Paul Jenkins.

Although La Tène is still generally interpreted as a sacred watery place, it is also possible that it was a 'trophy site', like some of the Middle Iron Age 'war sanctuaries' of Gaul (see below).²¹ One of the arguments for such an interpretation is the presence of human and animal remains, including those of more than 100 people, some decapitated, as well as the bones of horses. Although this theory throws new light on our understanding of a well-known site, to my mind it does not preclude ritual interpretation and the 'sacrifice' of the bodies and accoutrements of defeated enemies to the gods of the victors.

Ritual deposits in watery contexts are not uncommon in Iron Age Britain. The Battersea shield, the Waterloo helmet and the Wandsworth shield-mounts are just three of many highly decorated military objects from the Thames.²² But in terms of structured deposition, two British sites deserve particular mention: Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey and Fiskerton in Lincolnshire, the former's geographical position arguing persuasively, though not definitively, for its identification as the Druids' *sanctum sanctorum* as described by Tacitus.²³ Thierry Lejars' recent reinterpretation of the lake-shore assemblage at La Tène as a trophy site has led to speculation as to whether the watery deposition of martial and other equipment at Llyn Cerrig Bach, usually perceived as a sanctuary, might lend itself instead to the notion that it too may have been a trophy monument. Of course, like La Tène, the Anglesey deposition may represent both trophy taking and votive activity. The dating of the Llyn Cerrig Bach assemblage appears to fall into two groups spanning the period from the fourth century BC to the second century AD.²⁴ It remains a matter for debate as to whether the deposit here represents one or a few significant events, involving the curation and amassing of material or continuous or sporadic activity over several centuries. As at La Tène itself, animal remains were found at Llyn Cerrig, but were barely recorded in Cyril Fox's original publication, reference to part of a horse, pig, sheep and dog given only one page.²⁵ The discovery of human remains is also mentioned in Cyril Fox's report only to be dismissed,²⁶ but an unpublished letter in the archive of the National Museum Wales, from the foreman in charge of constructing RAF Valley in 1943 to Cyril Fox, the museum's director, clearly states that human remains were found with the metalwork.²⁷ Given that the hoard contained two slave-gang chains (see Figure 15), might it be that the human bones were those of the shackled people? Were they prisoners of war? Could they have been human sacrificial victims?

There is a certain congruence between Llyn Cerrig Bach and a site on the other side of Britannia, at Fiskerton on the lower reaches of the river

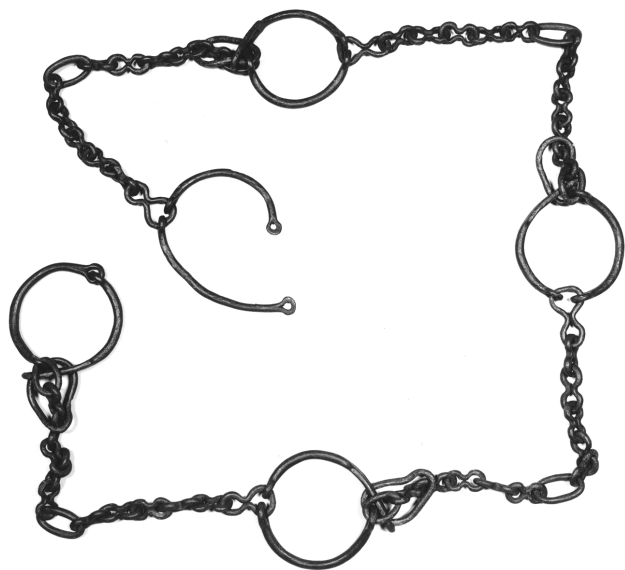


FIGURE 15 Iron slave-gang chain from the ritual deposit at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. © National Museum of Wales.

Witham in Lincolnshire. This waterway is renowned for its yield of deliberately deposited metalwork dating from the early Bronze Age right through to the early modern period, and including Iron Age military regalia such as the famous Witham Shield, decorated with its stylized boar symbol, part of a *carnyx* (a war trumpet) and a sword scabbard. In 1981 an archaeological excavation took place on a double row of wooden posts, cut from oak and alder, at Fiskerton on the north bank of the Witham, near where part of a La Tène sword had been found by a metal detectorist. Other martial equipment came to light during the investigation, together with human bones dating to the fifth or fourth century BC, including part of a skull bearing an unhealed sword cut.²⁸ But for present purposes it is the uprights of the timber causeway that are of most interest, for dendrochronological examination revealed distinct episodes of tree felling, beginning in the mid-fifth century BC and ending in the early fourth or late third century BC. A pattern of behaviour emerged wherein these timbers were regularly erected and then deliberately dismantled every twenty years or so. It has been suggested, although doubted by some scholars, that these events coincided with eclipses of the moon. If this were to have been the case, then it raises the possibility that the Druids may have been involved

here. Caesar and Pliny each make a point of referencing links between Druidic ritual and the phases of the moon.²⁹

Building for the gods

No one shall have gods to himself, either new gods or alien gods, unless recognized by the State. Privately they shall worship those gods whose worship they have duly received from their ancestors. In cities, they shall have shrines; they shall have groves in the country and homes for the *Lares*.

(CICERO, *DE LEGIBUS*, 2. 8)³⁰

It is becoming ever more apparent that several temples of Roman date in Britain and Gaul had Iron Age antecedents. A case in point is the shrine at Hayling Island (Hampshire), which seems to have begun its life as a wooden structure in the mid-first century BC until replaced by a masonry temple in AD 60–70. The Iron Age shrine was circular, within a rectilinear *temenos* (outer sacred precinct), and its Roman phase respected the earlier architectural design, becoming a more monumental and permanent structure.³¹ The material remains of ritual activity at the original sanctuary have been found mainly in the area outside the circular building, within the enclosed *temenos*, and consisted of coins, a large amount of military equipment buried in pits and copious animal bones, mostly of sheep or goats and pigs, presumably the remains of sacrifice and ritual feasting. The martial hardware calls to mind a group of middle Iron Age sacred sites in Gaul, considered now.

Shrines of war

When they [the Gauls] have decided to fight a battle, it is to Mars that they usually dedicate the spoils they hope to win; and if they are successful, they sacrifice the captured animals and collect all the rest of the spoils in one place. Among many of the tribes it is possible to see piles of these objects on consecrated ground. It is most unusual for anyone to dare to go against the religious law and hide his booty at home, or remove any of the objects that have been placed on such piles. The punishment laid down for that crime is death by the most terrible torture.

(CAESAR, *DE BELLO GALLICO*, 6. 17)³²

According to Caesar, then, warfare in Gaul was intimately interwoven with religious belief and ritual and, given the context of his comment, in the midst of his observations about the Druids, it is fair to assume that these religious leaders were central to military affairs even though – if we follow Caesar’s testimony – they were themselves exempt from conscription into the army.³³ This chapter has already touched on the possible interpretation of watery sites containing ‘votive’ offerings of martial equipment as ‘trophy sites’, citing Andrew Fitzpatrick’s comments concerning La Tène.³⁴ The argument here rests not just on the emphasis on weaponry at such sites but also on the presence there of human remains. The group of ‘war sanctuaries’ in middle Iron Age Gaul demonstrates persuasive evidence of trophy display. The northern Gallic war shrines *par excellence* are Gournay-sur-Aronde (Oise) and Ribemont-sur-Ancre (Somme).

The Bellovacan sanctuary at Gournay (see Figure 16) was strategically placed on the boundary between this tribal territory and three others. It was built within an *oppidum* (a tribal town) and, like La Tène, had an aquatic connection, constructed by a stream that pooled at the site of the shrine. A sacred enclosure was erected in the fourth century BC and, about a hundred years later, a temple was built.

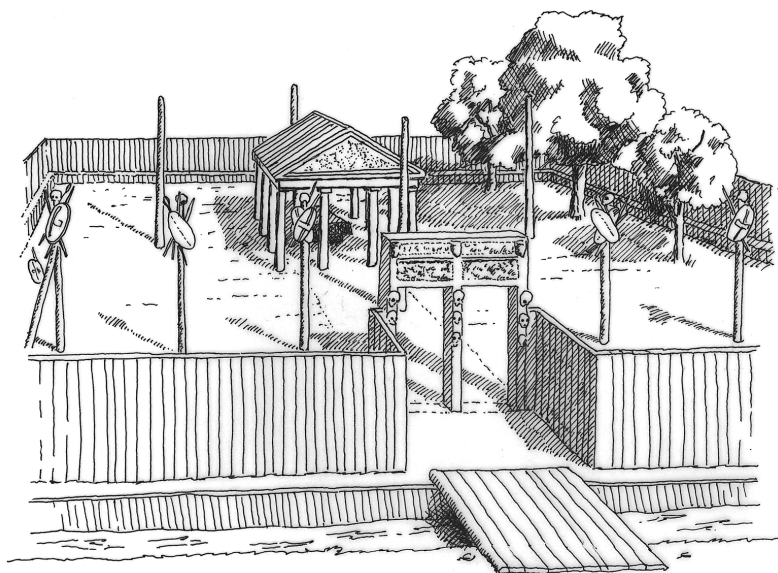


FIGURE 16 Reconstruction of the Iron Age temple at Gournay-sur-Aronde (Oise), France. © Paul Jenkins.

Between the fourth and second centuries BC, the weapons of defeated enemies were displayed on posts, some showing signs of deliberate mutilation. The enclosure ditch contained not only weapons but also the remains of animals belonging to several different domesticated species, including cattle and horses. Human remains were found here too, including cranial masks that stared out from the shrine's entrance.³⁵ The war shrine at Ribemont contained the beheaded remains of many young soldiers, some of their bodies carrying signs of battle wounds, together with a plethora of captured weapons. The most significant elements of this site were the four great 'ossuaries': rectangular, altar-like structures made from the long bones of horses and people, in the third century BC.³⁶ As I have commented elsewhere,³⁷ the evidence for systematic, highly organized and controlled nature of the rituals at these sites, and their fellows, suggests the presidency of professional religious functionaries, who are likely to have carried out the functions of Druids, whether or not always identified as such.

Headhunting and human sacrifice

The human crania displayed on the portal at Gournay exemplify a ritual tradition echoed elsewhere in Gaul and in Britannia. Most striking is the evidence from sanctuaries in the territory of the Saluvii in the Lower Rhône Valley, typified by the war shrines at Roquepertuse and Entremont, where decapitated human skulls jostle with carvings of single and multiple heads in temple furniture. Ian Armit³⁸ rightly comments that beheading is the epitome of aggression against the human body; it not only takes life, in an unimaginably violent act, but its consequence is the vilification and utter degradation of the human body, objectifying it and robbing its owner of personhood. Only cannibalism outranks decapitation in its inhumanity. Were the Druids involved in such acts?

And what about human sacrifice in general? The Classical texts vary in their attitude to this custom, although all writers who commented on it regarded it as abnormal. Caesar has a somewhat dispassionate air in describing the giant wicker men built in Gaul, filled with human victims who perished when the images were set alight.³⁹ Diodorus Siculus is more graphic in his testimony concerning the use of human sacrifice in divination (see Chapter Seven): interestingly, though, he specifically comments that 'no one should offer a sacrifice without a philosopher' (a term he uses to describe the Druids).⁴⁰ It is likely that the places where human sacrifice took place were *loci consecrati* in themselves, even without sacred

structures. We have seen this in the Classical literature on Druidic sacred groves (see above). In terms of specific archaeological evidence linking human sacrifice to place, two British Iron Age sites come immediately to mind: Danebury and Lindow Moss.

The fortified Iron Age settlement at Danebury (Hampshire) is well-documented for the re-use of its grain-storage pits as repositories for human and animal remains, as structured and ritualized deposits. The skeletons, mainly of young men (see Figure 17), are presented as whole, partial or as body parts, mainly skulls. The bones bear evidence of violence and at least one instance of butchery, as if for ritual cannibalism.⁴¹

There is clearly a link between the original use of the pits as corn silos and their after-use as graves. Were the bodies thank-offerings for keeping



FIGURE 17 Skeleton of a man buried in a disused grain silo, found during excavations of the Iron Age site at Danebury (Hampshire). The body's crossed wrists suggest that his hands had been bound. © The Danebury Trust.

the corn sweet over the winter? Or maybe they were placed in the silos in the hope of encouraging the gods to grant good harvests in the future. A long way away from Danebury, at the Iron Age Saluvian oppidum and sanctuary of Entremont, one of the orthostats sculpted with human heads bears on its side a carving of ears of corn.⁴² So a connection between the human head and the grain harvest may be recognized here too.

The bog bodies found in the 1980s at Lindow Moss (Cheshire) are the most eloquent testament for human sacrifice at the time the Druids were active in Britannia. I want to return to them in later chapters and so will refer to these bog deaths only briefly here. Lindow Man, the young man found during peat cutting in August 1984, probably met his death in the mid-first century AD.⁴³ It is well-known that he underwent a 'triple killing', being struck hard enough on the head to stun him, before being simultaneously garrotted and having his throat cut and shoved face down into the bog, still breathing (bog water was found in the lungs). He died wearing nothing but a fox-fur armlet. His well-preserved hands displayed no signs of manual work; his gut contained the residue of a griddled bannock made from a variety of seeds and cereal grains, the kind of 'last supper' also seen in some of the Danish Iron Age bog bodies. Most telling, perhaps, is the presence of mistletoe pollen in Lindow Man's stomach and, of course, that lends itself to a connection with the Druids and Pliny's description of the oak-and-mistletoe fertility and healing ritual on the sixth day of the moon.⁴⁴ At least two ritually murdered people were submerged in the Lindow bog and, even if not much time elapsed between the two killings, the act of repetition allows consideration of the bog itself as a sacred space.

Places for the dead

Graves can be spiritual spaces. The burial places of those interred within the context of a belief system may be steeped in ritual energy. This chapter is not the place to explore Iron Age burial customs in detail (see Chapter Nine) but one or two are of particular relevance here because some of the objects placed with the bodies suggest that these dead were themselves religious practitioners. Two graves exemplify such identities: one from Britain, at Mill Hill, Deal in Kent with a radiocarbon date between 360 BC and 100 BC; the other from Saint-Georges-lès-Baillargeaux (Vienne) in Gaul, dating to around 100 BC.

The Deal burial is singular in several ways. Its position was isolated, separate from the main cemetery discovered here and excavated in the

1980s.⁴⁵ And the grave's occupant seems also to have been outside the norm. The body is that of a young man, fragilely built and about thirty years old (see Figure 18). He lay supine in his grave-pit and his tomb has been called 'the warrior burial' because of the sword and shield with which he was interred. Both items of military equipment had been treated oddly: the iron sword in its ornate bronze scabbard had been carefully placed face-down so that the decorated surface was hidden. And the shield had been broken and folded in half lengthways (as if it was also 'dead') before being placed with the body.

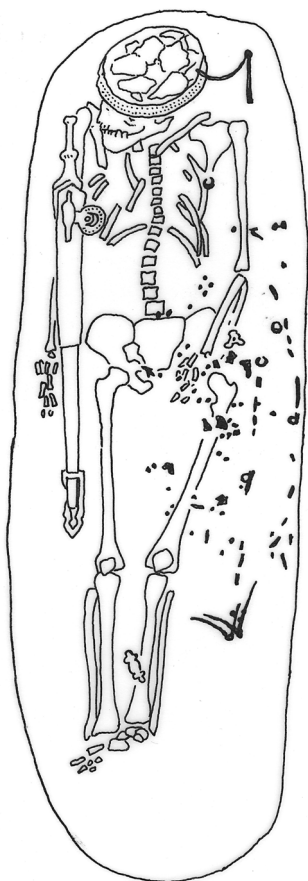


FIGURE 18 Male skeleton from the Iron Age cemetery at Mill Hill, Deal (Kent), showing the diadem around his head. © Paul Jenkins.

But the most extraordinary feature of this burial was the bronze headdress or diadem on the man's skull, the band encircling the head decorated with intricate La Tène designs. This was no warrior's helmet but rather a head-dress perhaps denoting the man's status as a priest (akin to ritual head-gear found in Romano-British temples such as Wanborough (Surrey)⁴⁶ and Hockwold-cum-Wilton (Norfolk)).⁴⁷ And finally, there is the ornate brooch found with the body, in a position close to the man's ankles, as if it had fastened a shroud rather than a cloak. All in all, the Deal 'warrior' was treated eccentrically in death. He bore the accoutrements of a fighting man but with subtle quirks. Might he have been a priest, even a Druid, given 'military honours' (the ancient equivalent of a flag-draped coffin) in his burial rite?

At about the same time as the Deal burial, another rich inhumation took place, with grave goods suggesting that the deceased was a religious specialist, at St-Georges-lès-Baillargeaux (Vienne). With the body was an assemblage of arguably sacrificial equipment (see Figure 19): a knife, more than 30 centimetres long and a set of three razors, graded in size, together with a whetstone for sharpening them.⁴⁸



FIGURE 19 Set of three razors and what is possibly a sacrificial knife from a later Iron Age grave at Saint-Georges-lès-Baillargeaux (Vienne), France. © Centre archéologique européen du Mont Beuvray.

Might this individual have had responsibility for ritual slaughter of animals (or even people)? And was his toolkit buried with this person for use in the afterlife or, perhaps, because it was too charged with spiritual energy to be left in the world of living humans?

Notes

- ¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6. 237–42; trans. C. Day Lewis, in Kitty Chisholm and John Ferguson, *Rome The Augustan Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/The Open University Press, 1981), p. 231.
- ² Lucan, *The Pharsalia*, 3. 390–416; trans. Robert Graves, *Lucan, Pharsalia: Dramatic Episodes of the Civil Wars* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), p. 78.
- ³ Richard Bradley, *An Archaeology of Natural Places* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
- ⁴ See Bradley, *An Archaeology of Natural Places*, pp. 3–33, for his discussion of Sámi and Cretan sites respectively.
- ⁵ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), pp. 251–86.
- ⁶ A. Watson, 'The sounds of transformation: acoustics, monuments and ritual in the British Neolithic', in N. Price (ed.), *The Archaeology of Shamanism* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 178–92.
- ⁷ Ruth Megaw and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art from its Beginnings to the Book of Kells* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989) p. 41; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images: Iconology and Cosmology in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 21 and 23.
- ⁸ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Dying for the Gods: Human Sacrifice in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), pp. 35 and 190; Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images*, p. 22, fig. 1.7.
- ⁹ 'The Gauls claim that they are all descended from Father Dis [the Roman gods of the Underworld]; they say this is the tradition handed down to them by the Druids. For this reason they reckon periods of time not in days but in nights; in celebrating birthdays, the first of the month, and the beginning of a year, they go on the principle that night comes first and is followed by day.' Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 18; trans. Anne Wiseman and Peter Wiseman, *Julius Caesar: The Battle for Gaul* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 123.
- ¹⁰ Steven Birch, *pers. comm.* Steven Birch, 'Steps into the Underworld: Excavations at High Pasture Cave, Skye' (Cardiff University Archaeology Research Seminar, 29 November 2007); Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 126. The High Pasture Cave Archaeological Project: www.high-pasture-cave.org.
- ¹¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5. 31; trans. J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 (1959–60), 247–55, p. 251.
- ¹² C. J. Lynn, 'The Iron Age Mound in Navan Fort: A Physical Realisation of Celtic Beliefs?', *Emania*, 10 (1992), 33–57; C. J. Lynn, 'Hostels, Heroes and Tales: Further Thoughts on the Navan Mound', *Emania*, 12 (1994), 5–20.
- ¹³ Miranda Green, *Celtic Art: Reading the Messages* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), p. 31; Megaw and Megaw, *Celtic Art from its Beginnings to the Book of Kells*, p. 197.
- ¹⁴ D. Robertson, 'The Navan Forty Metre Structure: Some observations regarding the social context of an Iron Age monument', *Emania*, 10 (1992), 25–32.

- ¹⁵ S. Esmonde Cleary, 'Roman Britain in 1992', *Britannia*, 24 (1993), 299.
- ¹⁶ Tony Gregory, *Excavations at Thetford, 1980-82, Fison Way* (Norwich: East Anglian Archaeological Report 53, 1992); Paul Sealey, *The Boudican Revolt against Rome* (Princes Risborough: Shire Archaeology 74, 1997), p. 12.
- ¹⁷ Cicero, *De Legibus*, 2. 8.
- ¹⁸ Macfarlane, *Underland*, pp. 85-116.
- ¹⁹ 'Nobody dared enter this grove except the priest; and even he kept out at midday, and between dawn and dusk - for fear that the gods might be abroad at such hours': Lucan, *The Pharsalia*, 3. 417-22; Graves, *Lucan, Pharsalia*, p. 79.
- ²⁰ Strabo, *Geography*, 4. 13; trans. Tierney, 'the Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', p. 262.
- ²¹ A. P. Fitzpatrick, 'The Finds from La Tène in the British Museum: La Tène, un site, un mythe 6', *Antiquaries Journal*, 98 (2018), pp. 43-80, after T. Lejars, *La Tène: la collection Schwab (Bienne, Suisse. La Tène, un site, un mythe* (Cahiers d'archéologie romande 140-1, 2013), p. 340.
- ²² Ian Stead, *The Battersea Shield* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1985); Vincent Megaw, *Art of the European Iron Age* (London: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 170 and 143.
- ²³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14. 30.
- ²⁴ Philip Macdonald, *Llyn Cerrig Bach: A Study of the Copper Alloy Artefacts from the Insular La Tène Assemblage* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 161-2.
- ²⁵ L. F. Cowley, 'Report on the Animal Bones', in Cyril Fox, *A Find of the Early Iron Age from Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1946), p. 97.
- ²⁶ Fox, *A Find of the Early Iron Age from Llyn Cerrig Bach*, p. 70.
- ²⁷ Macdonald, *Llyn Cerrig Bach*, p. 173.
- ²⁸ Naomi Field and Mike Parker Pearson, *Fiskerton: An Iron Age Timber Causeway with Iron Age and Roman Votive Offerings, the 1981 Excavations* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2003), xi-xii; A. T. Chamberlain, 'Lunar Eclipses, Saros Cycles and the Construction of the Causeway', in Field and Parker Pearson, pp. 136-48.
- ²⁹ Pliny, *Natural History*, 16. 95; Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 18.
- ³⁰ *De Legibus*, 2. 8.
- ³¹ A. King and G. Soffe, 'The Iron Age and Roman Temple at Hayling Island, Hampshire', in A. Fitzpatrick and P. Morris (eds), *The Iron Age in Wessex: Recent Work* (Salisbury: Trust for Wessex Archaeology, 1994), pp. 114-6; Alexander Smith, *The Differential Use of Sacred Space in Southern Britain, from the Late Iron Age to the 4th Century AD* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, British Series 318, 2001), pp. 172 and 198.
- ³² Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 17; trans. Wiseman and Wiseman 1980, p. 123.
- ³³ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 14.
- ³⁴ Fitzpatrick, 'The Finds from La Tène', pp. 72-3.
- ³⁵ Jean-Louis Brunaux, *Les Gaulois: Sanctuaires et Rites* (Paris: Errance, 1986), pp. 13 and 117-23; Jean-Louis Brunaux, *Les Druides: Des philosophes chez les Barbares* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), pp. 243-7.

- ³⁶ Fitzpatrick, 'The Finds from La Tène', p. 73; Brunaux, *Les Gaulois*, pp. 21–6; J. L. Brunaux, 'Ribemont-sur-Ancre (Somme): Bilan préliminaires et nouvelles hypothèses', *Gallia*, 56 (1999), 177–283.
- ³⁷ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids* (Newhaven: Yale University Press 2010), p. 135.
- ³⁸ Ian Armit, *Headhunting and the Body in Iron Age Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 45–68.
- ³⁹ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 16.
- ⁴⁰ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5. 31; trans. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', p. 251.
- ⁴¹ Barry Cunliffe, *Danebury: An Iron Age Hillfort in Hampshire* (York: Council for British Archaeology Research Report 52, 1984). B. Cunliffe, 'Pits, preconceptions and propitiation in the British Iron Age', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 11(1) (1992), 69–83; Barry Cunliffe, *Fertility, Propitiation and the Gods in the British Iron Age* (Amsterdam: Vijftiende Praehistorie te Amsterdam Opus 26, 1993).
- ⁴² Armit, *Headhunting and the Body*, p. 92.
- ⁴³ Ian Stead, J. B. Bourke and Don Brothwell, *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984).
- ⁴⁴ *Natural History*, 16. 95.
- ⁴⁵ Keith Parfitt, *Iron Age Burials from Mill Hill Deal* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 18–20.
- ⁴⁶ M. G. O'Connell and Joanna Bird, 'The Roman Temple at Wanborough, excavation 1985–1986', *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 82 (1994), 1–168, 93–4.
- ⁴⁷ British Museum, *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1964), p. 62.
- ⁴⁸ T. Lejars and F. Perrin, 'Des Tombes de Druides?', *L'Archéologue: Archéologie Nouvelle Hors Série* 2 (2000), pp. 37–40. This tomb is one of several late Iron Age Gallic inhumation graves with ritual equipment: for details, see the article cited.

Chapter Four

IMAGES AND SYMBOLS: SACRED ART AND THE DRUIDS

They [the Germanic tribes] are distinguished by a common worship of Nerthus, or Mother Earth. They believe that she interests herself in human affairs and rides through their peoples. In an island of Ocean stands a sacred grove, and in the grove stands a car draped with a cloth that none but the priest may touch. The priest can feel the presence of the goddess in this holy of holies, and attends her, in deepest reverence, as her car is drawn by kine.

(TACITUS, *GERMANIA*, 40)¹

This chapter concerns the relationship between the Druids and the physical expressions of ritual and belief under their jurisdiction. Tacitus's observation is both clouded and revealing. He makes no mention of an actual image of Nerthus but indicates the sanctity of the vehicle in which she was believed to have travelled round her territory. Her ritual procession, presumably a kind of 'beating the bounds' to bestow her fertility upon the land, was marked by rejoicing and merrymaking, but also by the laying down of weapons and the locking away of all iron objects, in a bid to create peace and calm during Nerthus's visitation. Of course, Tacitus was commenting not upon Gallo-British Druidic customs but upon those of Germanic peoples who, according to Caesar (writing more than 100 years before Tacitus), had no Druids.² But the Nerthus passage has relevance in its reference to the perceived holiness of objects, like the goddess's mode of transport. Indeed, so sacred was it deemed that when, after the ceremony, the cart, the cloth and – by implication – the goddess herself were washed in a secluded lake, the slaves who carried out the cleansing ritual were immediately killed by drowning in the water. Tacitus concludes the story: 'Thus mystery begets terror and a pious reluctance to ask what that sight can be which is allowed only to dying eyes.'

Tacitus's commentary on the Germanic Nerthus-ritual serves to set the scene for exploration of sacred imagery and art that appears to have been central to Iron Age Gallic and British belief systems and, by inference, to the religious officials who liaised with the gods and were in charge of outward expressions of their worship, in the form of presenting holiness through visual representation. In the Prologue, I mentioned Caesar's account of the annual Druidic assembly that took place in the territory of the Carnutes.³ It is likely that such priestly gatherings – one might almost call them synods – might have served as spiritual marketplaces, where ideas about the sacred and their artistic expression could have been swapped and pooled, thus connecting far-flung religious communities and their 'flocks'.

Torcs, power and spirituality

Soon afterwards, when Ariovistus was their leader, the Insubrian Gauls vowed to dedicate to their war-god a torc made from the spoils of our soldiers. Jupiter intercepted this dedication; for Flaminius set up in honour of Jupiter a golden trophy made from their torcs.
(FLORUS, *EPITOME OF ROMAN HISTORY*)⁴

In 1948, a lavender field at Snettisham in Norfolk underwent the deeper ploughing necessary to prepare for the planting of a cereal crop, thereby uncovering the first of many deposits of precious metal torcs (neck rings) from Snettisham. The superb 'great torc', highly decorated with intricate La Tène designs, contained an Iron Age coin which helped to date the deposits to the mid-first century BC. Subsequent – archaeologically led – discoveries up to 1990 revealed more than 100 pieces of 'ring-jewellery', mostly torcs, and the 1990 excavations were able to show that some of these were deposited in 'nests', many hidden under the false bottoms of pits, designed to hinder ancient looters.⁵ So, what did these extraordinary deposits of gold and silver mean to the people who interred them? They were found in the territory of the Iceni, the Iron Age tribe which was later to produce Boudica, the rebel queen who nearly cost the Roman Empire the fledgling province of Britannia (who, incidentally, was described by Dio Cassius, one of her biographers, as wearing a heavy gold torc).⁶ There has been lively debate among scholars as to whether this treasure was simply buried for safekeeping, rather as one might, today, put surplus money into a savings bank account, or for some other purpose,

such as votive deposition, gifts to the gods (see Chapter Three). Andrew Fitzpatrick⁷ is right in pointing out that both these interpretations are not mutually exclusive. The treasure was clearly deliberately buried for concealment, separating it from impious hands and, perhaps, as in ancient Greek sacrificial practices, was designed to be 'shared' between gods and the community.

The Snettisham deposits need to be seen within the broader context of the symbolism of torcs. The quotation above serves to emphasize the special nature of these ornaments. And this is reinforced by the testimony of other Classical writers who speak of Gallic neck rings as valuable gifts, fit for emperors as well as gods.⁸ The argument for the sanctity of torcs is reinforced by some scarce but revealing Iron Age images of 'gods' in human form, wearing torcs and seated in the cross-legged or 'yogic' position. Such a figure is a bronze statuette of a young naked male from Bouray (Essonnes) (see Figure 20), probably produced in the first century BC.⁹

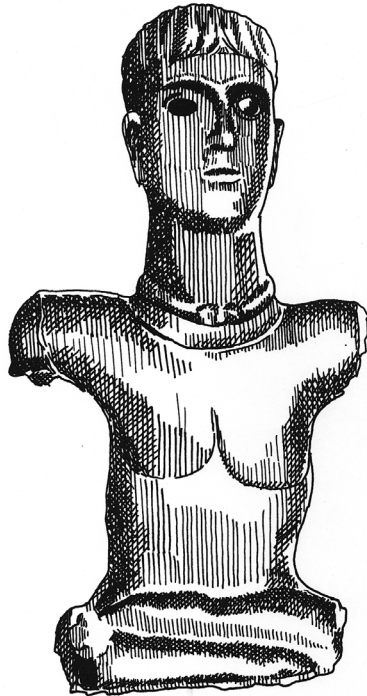


FIGURE 20 Bronze image of a person with hooves and wearing a torc, from Bouray (Essonnes), France. Height 42 centimetres. © Paul Jenkins.

He wears a torc with rounded terminals (known as a buffer torc). His arms are missing; the proportions of his body are deliberately distorted, so that his head is huge, his torso foreshortened, his diminutive legs ending in hooves. So, care was taken to present this image as asymmetrical and wilfully contra-human. The exaggerated head indicates its importance (chiming with Gallic head-trophy-taking rituals referenced in Chapter Three) and the bronze-smith has presented a shape-shifter, segueing between human and animal form. The entire image is steeped in 'otherness', with fluidity between proportion, shape and identity.¹⁰

So, was the symbolism of torcs directly associated with the Druids? The only written evidence we have is a small body of Classical text references to the way in which the Romans perceived these alien ornaments: as worthy exotic things suitable as high-status gifts. However, material culture appears to point to the freighting of torcs with ritual symbolism: from the high art of some of the Snettisham material to images of what surely must be deities or religious officials wearing these items. Two Gaulish images of late Iron Age or early Roman date reinforce such a supposition: one comes from the healing water sanctuary of Chamalières (Puy-de-Dôme) in the Auvergne; the other from Pauvrely (Indre-et-Loire). The Auvergne site dates to the early first century AD and appears to have had a short sacred life of fewer than 100 years. But during that time sick pilgrims flocked to the shrine to partake of the holy spring water and to deposit wooden votive objects carved into images of themselves or their afflicted body parts, in the hope that the presiding deity would heal them. One wooden figure stands out, as if she were a priestess (or even a goddess) rather than a supplicant for, while most of the votives were sketchily rendered or depicted as male pilgrims wearing the heavy hooded Gallic *sagum* (woollen cloak), she was carefully presented as a woman wearing a heavy robe fastened by a brooch, with thick hair partially covered by a veil, and round her neck a torc with heavy buffer terminals.¹¹ The late Iron Age stone figure from Pauvrely is especially interesting: it represents a person, naked but for a large torc, with both (overlarge) hands in the act of playing a flute-like instrument. But one hand has six fingers, as if to represent something other than human or, perhaps, to reflect particular musical acuity. Given the link made by Diodorus Siculus between Druids and music,¹² could this be a rare example of a Druid in action?

The testimony of coins

The images, or types, on coins are no mere decorations invented by the idle imagination of an artist, but are ideas of great emotional significance.'

(DESMONDE, *MAGIC, MYTH AND MONEY*, 1962)¹³

In 1995 John Creighton published a paper in which he presented a cogent and persuasive argument for the centrality of the Druids in terms of both wielding and expressing power and authority in late Iron Age Britain.¹⁴ He rightly identified coins as having a particularly influential role in power politics, and suggests that the imagery on both late Iron Age coins and other media of art (see Figure 21) (such as that displayed on military equipment and jewellery (including torcs)) may well have been orchestrated by Druids and other politico-religious groups.

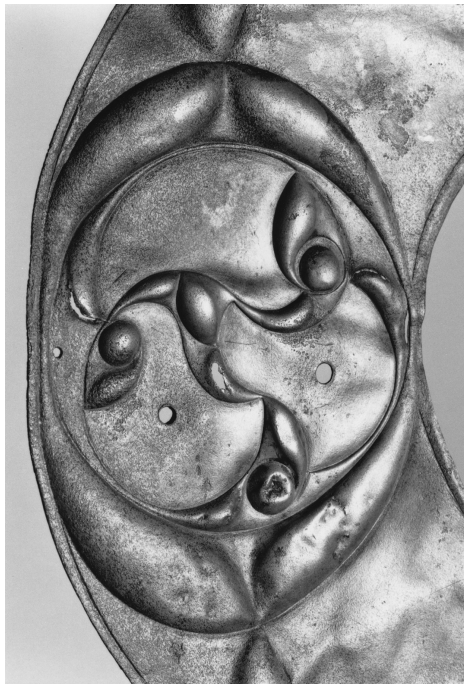


FIGURE 21 Close-up of the triskele (three-armed symbol) on the crescentic plaque found at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. © National Museum of Wales.

It is no coincidence that the burgeoning of imagery on coins occurred during this critical time for Britannia, in the first centuries BC/AD, when the Romans were knocking on the door and bursting into south-east England. In her discussion of certain hoards containing precious-metal jewellery from Roman Britain, Hilary Cool used a telling phrase, describing coins as ‘discs with images’.¹⁵ I think this is an important way of looking at the reverse face of Iron Age coins because, as Creighton has indicated, many contain motifs of profoundly religious connotations. So, the Druids may well have been at least partially responsible for ownership of small but highly portable visual messages designed as semi-covert rallying calls of British authority. In Gaul and Britannia, several coin issues carry images of people with torcs.¹⁶ The reverse of a silver coin (see Figure 22) provenanced to the British Midlands (but probably minted in southern England) depicts the Gallo-British antlered god, often known as Cernunnos (a Gaulish word meaning ‘Horned’ or ‘Peaked One’).¹⁷ But an interesting interplay between British and Roman symbols of religious authority may also be discerned within coin imagery.

John Creighton has identified what he thinks was an organized cult centred on the pro-Roman late Iron Age south-eastern British rulers, Commius and Verica. Their coins contain specifically indigenous image references, such as a figure standing next to a disembodied human head displayed on a stick, but also the curious ritual objects known as *litui*



FIGURE 22 Iron Age silver coin bearing the image of a moustached human face, sprouting antlers and wearing a wheel-decorated headdress, said to have been found in the British Midlands but probably minted in southern England; in the collections of the National Museum Wales. © Anne Leaver.

(singular, *lituus*), which were implements used by Roman augurs in predicting the future.¹⁸ If the Druids were behind the selection of coin images, the symbolism of *litui* appears at first glance to be a puzzle, since Classical literature tends to paint Druids as fervently anti-Roman. But, as seen in earlier chapters, Diviciacus, ruler of the Gallic Aedui, was both a close friend of Caesar's and a Druid, a reminder that the relationship between Druids and Romans could be complex and personal.

One of the features of Iron Age coin 'art', which is shared closely by symbolic motifs in La Tène art generally, is the element of surreality, the deliberate manipulation or distortion of natural images – whether human, animal or floral – to produce symbols, steeped in meanings and messages, the most powerful of which is likely to have been the visual acknowledgement of divinity or spirit forces. Coins should not be seen in isolation, whether in terms of imagery or purpose but are more usefully interpreted as agents for reflection and endorsement of religious and social mores and meanings, and their size and mobility would have given the dissemination of their visual messages a particular thrust and potency.¹⁹ So the presence of torcs on coins, already mentioned in the previous section, falls into place, particularly when they are exaggerated in size. And the same is true of other dimensional distortions, such as the over-large antlers on a silver coin from Maidstone in Kent, the bronze coin of the Gallic Veliocasses, depicting a wild boar with massive dorsal bristles²⁰ and the triple-tailed horse imagery found, for instance, on a gold coin of the Dobunni tribe, minted by its ruler Bodvoc at Corinium (Cirencester) (see Figure 23).²¹



FIGURE 23 Iron Age gold coin from Corinium (Cirencester). The obverse bears the inscribed name Bodvoc, the reverse depicts a triple-tailed horse. © Corinium Museum.

Both antlers and bristles are indicative of potency and aggression. Less surreal but also hyperbolic are the Breton (Armorican) coin-reverses depicting naked horsewomen with wild hair, galloping along astride their mounts, brandishing weapons and shields, or bearing torcs (see Figure 24). One particularly evocative such image is on a coin from Tour: a bushy-haired naked woman with a shield and a huge torc, riding what appears to be a pair of horses: there is no sign of a chariot.²²



FIGURE 24 Iron Age potin coin minted by the Remi (a tribe of north-east Gaul). It bears an image of a woman with braided hair, seated cross-legged and carrying a torc in one hand. © Paul Jenkins.

Head spaces

They cut off the heads of enemies slain in battle and attach them to their horses. The blood-stained spoils they hand over to their attendants and carry off as booty, while striking up a paean and singing a song of victory, and they nail up these first fruits upon their houses just as do those who lay low wild animals in certain kinds of hunting.

(DIDORUS SICULUS, *LIBRARY OF HISTORY*, 5. 28)²³

So wrote Diodorus of Gaulish war customs in the late first century BC, firmly attributing the collection of human heads to ritual and sacrificial action. We have explored Classical testimony in previous chapters

and, for the most part, there is but shadowy and circumstantial evidence from material culture to make strong links between head-harvesting and religious officials. Some of the best archaeological data comes not from Gaul or Britain but from the Iron Age fortified settlement of Numancia near Soria, in Celtiberia (north-east Spain), where there is clear linguistic evidence (from place names) that 'Celtic' languages, cognate with ancient Gallo-British, were spoken.²⁴ Here, during the second century BC, the bodies of a group of eight high-ranking men were cremated and the calcined remains of each individual buried in company with strange figured bronze objects, best described as sceptre heads.²⁵ These consist of a ferrule, into which presumably fitted a wooden staff, above which are images of twin horses, joined back-to-back beneath their curved necks (see Figure 25).



FIGURE 25 Bronze sceptre-terminal, depicting a double horse and a horseman, with human severed trophy-heads hanging from the horse-harness, from a cemetery within the Iron Age fortified township of Numancia, Spain. © Professor Alfredo Jimeno Martínez.

On the joint ‘body’ sits a helmeted horseman; beneath each animal’s front hooves is a disembodied human head, with another larger head beneath the chest of each beast, as though hanging from its harness. It is hard to avoid making a connection between the textual description and these unique images. And might the high-status people whose remains were interred with these badges of office have been priests, whether or not they were identified as Druids or, more likely, possessed local titles?

Torcs and disembodied heads appear to have been iconic symbols of power, sanctity and priesthood. And I want briefly to engage with two images that, although geographically (and probably chronologically) widely separate from one another, nonetheless share these two signifiers. One is from the Czech Republic and dates to the third century BC; the other is from Anglesey and is probably of late Iron Age or early Roman date. I acknowledge that the first is a long way from the Gallo-British heartlands of the Druids but there are strong linkages in Iron Age material culture between western and eastern Europe, particularly in terms of art and religious expressions – as is exemplified by the head-and-torc motif explored here. Both heads are of stone: the Czech one is life-size; the Anglesey head rather larger.

The Bohemian head was originally attached to a statue but deliberately broken in antiquity and buried ceremoniously in a pit. It was found in 1943 at Mšecké Zehrovice. The face is of an adult man, with a large, curled moustache (similar to Classical descriptions of Gallic men), and his hair is represented *en brosse* (again chiming with ancient texts).²⁶ Around his neck is a large torc with chunky buffer terminals. But the most striking thing about his head is the ‘tonsure’, clearly visible at the back; a shaven cranium rimmed by the narrow fringe of thick curly hair at the curves round the top of the head to each ear.²⁷ In her discussion of this feature, Natalie Venclová²⁸ has put forward the tentative suggestion that this hairstyle might signify the image’s identification as a priest, maybe even a Druid. ‘Monastic’ tonsures cannot be traced earlier than the earliest Christian Church, when early Irish monks deliberately expressed difference between their Church and that of Rome by adopting the wide, cross-scalp shaving rather than the circular Roman tonsure. That the Mšecké Zehrovice head displayed shaving rather than baldness is suggested by the deliberate cross-hatching evident on the back. So, although it cannot of course be argued that this third-century BC stone head had anything to do with the Church, it is nonetheless possible that the head-shaving indicated a special, perhaps priestly significance, something endorsed by the massive torc. And the treatment of the object itself is important: the

head was deliberately severed from the rest of the statue (never found) and was intentionally buried upright in a ritual pit associated with one of the central European Iron Age ritual enclosures known as *Viereckschanze*.²⁹ Did this burial mark the passing of a prominent member of an Iron Age priestly class?

There are both resemblances and dissonances between the stone head from Bohemia and the one from Bryn y Môr Farm on Anglesey (see Figure 26). The latter was discovered in the 1950s while rebuilding a stone wall.³⁰ So, unlike the former, it has no secure archaeological context. However, it is one of a few stone disembodied heads from Britannia whose features engender reasonable confidence that this is a genuine antiquity, possibly of late Iron Age date, perhaps broadly contemporary with the ritually deposited hoard of metalwork from Llyn Cerrig Bach (see Chapter Three).

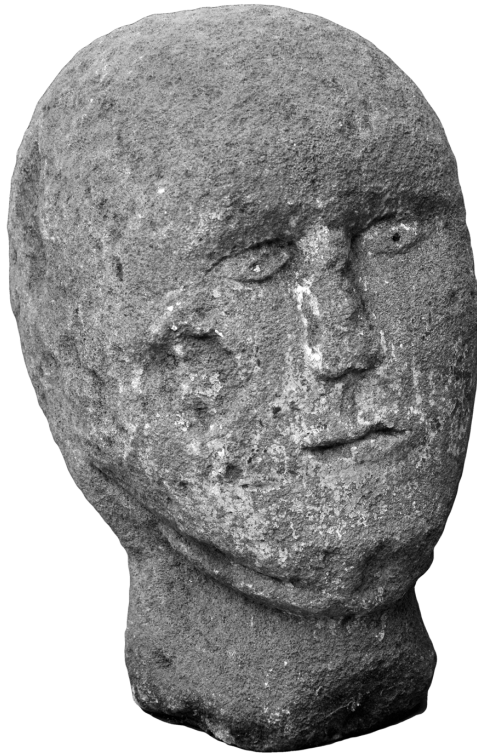


FIGURE 26 Stone disembodied head, of Iron Age or Roman date, found re-used in a wall at Bryn y Môr Farm, Anglesey. © Oriel Ynys Môn, Llangefni, Anglesey.

The facial features are simply delineated, with the almond-shaped eyes, wedge-shaped nose and thin mouth typical of other Iron Age head images.³¹ It is hairless, but something is carved around the neck that could be a ligature but is perhaps better interpreted as a simple neck ring or torc. It is considerably larger than life-size, suggesting the importance of the being represented. Could it have been a god or a Druid, depicted on his sacred island?

Shape-shifting and thresholds

On a recent trip to the Indian state of Karnataka, I visited a number of Hindu temples at Badami in order to gain some understanding of a polytheistic system other than those of ancient Europe. Apart from the bewildering plethora of gods and goddesses, often depicted in half-human, half-animal, or half-male, half-female form, I was struck by the rituals involving worshippers. Not only do visitors remove their shoes before entering holy ground, but they must also avoid treading on threshold stones at entranceways because these (often carved with symbols) are deemed especially sacred.³² Britain, too, has its own sacred boundary or threshold traditions. In south Wales, the wassailing custom of the Mari Lwyd (the Grey Mare), first recorded in 1800, still takes place on Twelfth Night. It involves placing a horse's skull on a pole, carried by a man swathed in a sack. The hobby-horse is then paraded by a group of men who visit people's houses, asking entry through song and being repeatedly denied it by the householders who also respond by singing. Finally, the Mari Lwyd and her men prevail, and they are allowed into the house and given food and drink.³³ This folk custom (see Figure 27) is laden with threshold symbolism: the man/horse, the doorway as a barrier to be breached, and the alternating songs on either side of the border between inside and outside. And, of course, Twelfth Night is itself a boundary, signalling the end of Christmas.

It goes without saying that neither the Hindu temples of Karnataka nor an eighteenth-century southern Welsh folk tradition can have any specific relevance to ancient Druids. However, such references may serve to illustrate the sacred significance of borders and oscillations,³⁴ and these do have a voice within Iron Age ritual and belief. Shamans, past and present, are closely associated with the ability to cross boundaries between the material and spirit world, often by taking on the persona of opposite genders and invoking animal helpers to aid them in reaching the spirits.³⁵ Indeed, it is probable that the Druids, as possessing close links with the



FIGURE 27 The Mari Lwyd wassailing ceremony, Star Hill, Llanfihangel Tor y Mynydd, Gwent. © Professor Raymond Howell.

gods, were also able to take ‘soul-flight’ between the human and divine dimensions. Caesar comments on their role as curators of memory³⁶ and Cicero on the expertise of the Druid Diviciacus in divining the future.³⁷ In terms of imagery, borders, thresholds and boundary crossing may be traced in depictions of human or animal figures that abandon ‘material normality’ for surreality, for example in shape-shifting motifs. The late Iron Age silver coin bearing the image of an antlered human head, already considered earlier in this chapter, is a case in point. A striking image appearing on many northern Gallic coin-issues is that of a war horse (either pulling a chariot or bearing a rider) with a human face.³⁸

Some of the imagery of Roman Gaul and Britain, which survived the influence of *romanitas* after their absorption into the Roman Empire, similarly expresses the desire to depict the sacred by breaking boundaries

between human and animal forms and by twisting gender. So, for example, we find glorious subversions in the little stone plaque from Cirencester (Gloucestershire) that displays an antlered person whose legs are replaced by two writhing and ram-headed serpents,³⁹ and in a bronze figurine of a triple-horned wild boar, from Cahors in southern Gaul (see Figure 28), with great tusks, stiff dorsal bristles and sow's teats.⁴⁰ Such transitional imagery makes the best sense as part of a shamanic tradition that fed into the roles of the Druids as bridges between their people and the gods.

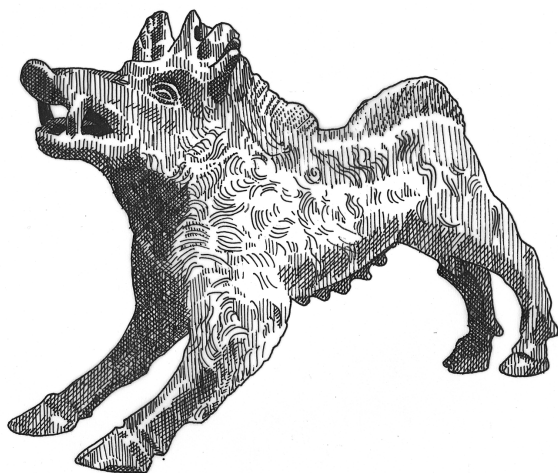


FIGURE 28 Gallo-Roman bronze figurine of a triple-horned wild boar/sow, Cahors, southern France. © Paul Jenkins.

Sacred woods

The images of the gods, grim and rude, were uncouth blocks formed of felled tree trunks. Their mere antiquity and the ghastly hue of their rotten timber struck terror; men feel less awe of deities worshipped under familiar forms; so much does it increase their sense of fear not to know the gods whom they dread.

(LUCAN, *THE PHARSALIA*, 3)⁴¹

So wrote Lucan of the sacred grove encountered by Julius Caesar's army outside Massilia (Marseille) in southern Gaul in the mid-first century BC.

This brief extract is freighted with meaning: the crudeness of the images, their antiquity, alien appearance and decay, together with their context within a dark and terrifying forest made them seem utterly weird to Roman soldiers used to worshipping effigies of their gods in inert metal and stone. Wood is far from inert. Hewn from living trees, whose sap ‘bleeds’ when cut, wooden images mimic the changes and decay to which dead humans and animals are subject.⁴² These wooden carvings would become soft when wet and fade to bleached brittleness over time during dry spells. Their very ability to change, their faces to blur to mask-like forms and their limbs to contort would give rise to the notion that living spirits dwelt therein ready to pounce upon the unwary non-believer (see Figure 29).

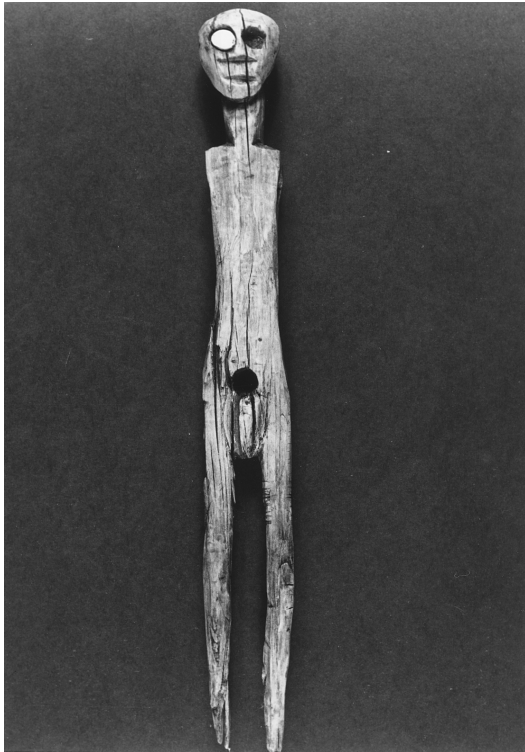


FIGURE 29 Early Iron Age yew-wood figurine, the remaining eye made of quartz, like the larger alder image from Ballachulish. The figure illustrated was part of a group with a model boat from Roos Carr, Humber Estuary. Height approximately 35 centimetres.

© Hull and East Riding Museum: Hull Museums.

Ancient wooden images tend not to survive unless in watery domains: springs, rivers or marshland. There is a small but rich group of late Bronze Age and Iron Age wooden figurines from aquatic contexts in Britannia.⁴³ One is of particular interest: the large alder figure from Ballachulish in Argyll. The image has been radiocarbon dated to the earliest Iron Age (seventh to sixth century BC). It represents a woman, naked but for a baldric-like belt slung from her right shoulder to her left hip; her eyes were made of quartz pebbles. Her pubis is exaggerated in comparison to her tiny breasts, and her face suggests that she represents a middle-aged or elderly woman. Her archaeological context is particularly significant: records made at the time of her discovery in the nineteenth century tell of her deposition within a small boggy sanctuary, perhaps enclosed by a wicker structure. What is more, there was reference to the figurine's placement face down in the peat, pinned there by hurdles.⁴⁴ If this is so, then it appears that the Ballachulish figure may have been a surrogate human sacrifice, for many North European Iron Age human bog bodies were similarly treated: wedged into position by wooden stakes or branches.⁴⁵ A case in point is the female bog body from Haraldskaer in Denmark, discovered in 1835. She died in around 490 BC when she was about 40–50 years old. She was strangled and placed, naked, in a remote peat bog, secured in position with stout hurdles cut from trees surrounding the swamp. She had been a person of some status in her community. She was well-nourished and her preserved hands and bones showed no signs of the wear and tear associated with heavy, repetitious physical labour. Forensic examination of her teeth has recently revealed that in the months prior to her death, she undertook a significantly long journey as far as southern Germany.⁴⁶ Although hundreds of miles apart and separated by at least 200 years, there are similarities between the Ballachulish image and the bog woman from Jutland, not least in that each was pinned down in a remote marshy environment. Iron Age images, whether of stone or wood, are rare and the figure from Ballachulish is exceptionally large, being life-size (at 1.5 metres (nearly 5 feet)). So, there are persuasive arguments for seeing her as a substitute for a real person. Given the link made by a number of Classical texts between human sacrifice and the Druids, it is at least possible that they, or their antecedents, were behind the 'death' of a wooden lady from a wild, uncultivated piece of boggy ground.

Notes

¹ Tacitus, *Germania*, 40; trans. H. Mattingly, *Tacitus on Britain and Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), pp. 133–4.

- ² Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 21.
- ³ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13.
- ⁴ Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*, trans. E. S. Forster, *Lucius Annaeus Florus: Epitome of Roman History* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Edition, 1929), pp. 91–3. Livy describes a similar event in the battle between the Roman army and the Boii, a Gallic tribe living around Lake Como in northern Italy, where booty collected by the victorious Romans included a massively heavy golden torc, which was dedicated to Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill (*Ab Urbe Condita*, 33, 36, 13).
- ⁵ I. M. Stead, 'The Snettisham Treasure: excavations in 1990', *Antiquity*, 65/248 (1991a), 447–64.
- ⁶ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 62. 2.
- ⁷ A. P. Fitzpatrick, 'The Snettisham, Norfolk, hoards of Iron Age Torques: sacred or profane?', *Antiquity*, 66/251 (1992), 395–8.
- ⁸ In his *Institutio Oratoria*, 6. 79, the author Quintilian (born c. AD 30) alludes to a gift of a huge gold torc to the emperor Augustus by Gallic supplicants.
- ⁹ René Joffroy, *Musée des Antiquités Nationales, Saint-Germain-en-Laye* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1979), no. 78.
- ¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of images with torcs, see Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 40–7.
- ¹¹ Anne-Marie Romeuf and Monique Dumontet, *Les ex-voto gallo-romains de Chamalières (Puy de Dôme)* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2000), pp. 62–90: for the priestess see p. 117; also see Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Celtic Art: Reading the Messages* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), pp. 84–5, fig. 56.
- ¹² Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images*, p. 181, fig. 7.1; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5. 31. 2.
- ¹³ W. H. Desmond, *Magic, Myth and Money: The Origin of Money in Religious Ritual* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe Inc., 1962), p. 67.
- ¹⁴ John Creighton, 'Visions of Power: Imagery and Symbols in Late Iron Age Britain', *Britannia*, 26 (1995), 285–301.
- ¹⁵ Hilary Cool, 'The significance of snake jewellery hoards', *Britannia*, 31 (2000), 29–40.
- ¹⁶ For example, see Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images*, p. 44, fig. 2.8; and p. 58, fig. 3.3.
- ¹⁷ G. C. Boon, 'A coin with the head of the Cernunnos', *Seaby Coin and Medal Bulletin*, 769 (1982), 276–82; M. J. Aldhouse-Green, 'Metaphors, Meaning and Money', in P. de Jersey (ed.), *Celtic Coinage: New Discoveries, New Discussion* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1532, 2006), pp. 29–40.
- ¹⁸ John Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 191–3; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 163–4.
- ¹⁹ Aldhouse-Green, 'Metaphors, Meaning and Money', p. 29.
- ²⁰ Aldhouse-Green, 'Metaphors, Meaning and Money', p. 36, figs 23 and 24.
- ²¹ In Corinium Museum; Elizabeth Cotton, Philip de Jersey, Chris Rudd and John Sills, *Ancient British Coins* (Aylsham: Chris Rudd, 2010), p. 104, no. ABC 2039.

- ²² Paul-Marie Duval, *Monnaies Gauloises et Mythes Celtiques* (Paris: Hermann, 1987), p. 51. For other examples see Aldhouse-Green, 'Metaphors, Meaning and Money', p. 37, figs 27 and 28.
- ²³ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5. 29, 4; trans. J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 (1959–60), p. 250.
- ²⁴ John Koch, *An Atlas for Celtic Studies. Archaeology and Names in Ancient Europe and Early Medieval Ireland, Britain and Brittany* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2007), map 16.1 and pp. 22–3.
- ²⁵ A. J. Martínez, 'Religión y Ritual Funerario Celtibéricos', *Revista de Soria*, 25 (1999), 5–18, figure on p. 7.
- ²⁶ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of Roman History*, 5. 28, 1–3.
- ²⁷ M. J. Aldhouse-Green, 'Crowning Glories: Languages of Hair in Later Prehistoric Europe', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 70 (2004c), 307, fig. 4.
- ²⁸ N. Venclová, 'The Venerable Bede, druidic tonsure and archaeology', *Antiquity*, 76 (2002), 458–71.
- ²⁹ Vincent Megaw, *Art of the European Iron Age* (London: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 171.
- ³⁰ Personal information from Mr Ian Jones, Curator of Oriel Ynys Môn, Llangefni, Anglesey. Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 139.
- ³¹ Such as those discussed in Ian Armit, *Headhunting and the Body in Iron Age Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- ³² For background to the Badami temples, see George Michell, *Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal* (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2017), pp. 43–75, and figure on p. 57.
- ³³ D. Jones, 'The Mari Lwyd: A Twelfth Night Custom', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 5 (1888), 389–93; Christina Hole, *English Custom and Usage* (London: Batsford, 1941–2), p. 10. Pers. Comm. Prof. Raymond Howell.
- ³⁴ See, for instance, Hilda Ellis Davidson (ed.), *Boundaries and Thresholds: Papers from a Colloquium of the Katharine Briggs Club* (Woodchester: The Thimble Press, 1993).
- ³⁵ Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman: Voyages of the Soul; Trance, Ecstasy and Healing. From Siberia to the Amazon* (London: Macmillan, 1995).
- ³⁶ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 14.
- ³⁷ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 1. 90.
- ³⁸ Duval, *Monnaies Gauloises et Mythes Celtiques*, pp. 38 and 45.
- ³⁹ Martin Henig, *Roman Sculpture from the Cotswold Region* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 32, no. 93, pl. 26; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*, p. 142.
- ⁴⁰ M. Dayet, 'Le sanglier à trois cornes de Cabinet des Medailles', *Revue Archéologique de l'est et du centre-est*, 5 (1954), 334–5.
- ⁴¹ Lucan, *The Pharsalia*, 3. 417–21; trans. J. D. Duff, *Lucan The Civil War* (Cambridge MA: Heinemann, Loeb Edition, 1927), pp. 142–7.
- ⁴² Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Seeing the Wood for the Trees: The Symbolism of Trees and Wood in Ancient Gaul and Britain* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2000), p. 5.

- ⁴³ Bryony Coles, 'Anthropomorphic wooden figures from Britain and Ireland', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 56 (1990), 315–33; B. J. Coles, 'Wood Species for Wooden Figures: A Glimpse of a Pattern', in A. Gibson and D. Simpson (eds), *Prehistoric Ritual and Religion* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1998), pp. 163–73.
- ⁴⁴ Vincent Megaw and Derek Simpson, *Introduction to British Prehistory* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1979), p. 477; Aldhouse-Green, *Seeing the Wood for the Trees*, p. 18.
- ⁴⁵ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Bog Bodies Uncovered: Solving Europe's Ancient Mystery* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015a), pp. 11 and 179.
- ⁴⁶ Aldhouse-Green, *Bog bodies Uncovered*, pp. 11–14; Lone Hvass, *Dronning Gunhild – et moselig fra jernalderen* (Vejle: Sesam, 1998). Pers. Comm. Vejle Museum, for information concerning the forensic analysis of Haraldskaer woman's teeth.

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Chapter Five

WELSH CONNECTIONS: SPOTLIGHT ON DRUIDIC WALES

The Druids hold that the soul of a dead man does not descend to the silent, sunless world of Hades but becomes reincarnate elsewhere; if they are right, death is merely a point of change in perpetual existence.

(LUCAN, *THE PHARSALIA*, 1)¹

The ancient Druidic doctrine of reincarnation has been mentioned briefly already in this volume and is explored in detail in the final chapter. We have the testimony of several Classical writers, including Caesar, about Gaulish beliefs in rebirth after death and an afterlife essentially similar to that of earthly existence. There is also abundant archaeological evidence from burials with grave goods, including food and drink, to suggest a belief in another world parallel to the one vacated by the dead. I quote Lucan here because his observation resonates with a particular episode contained within medieval Welsh mythological texts. Such writings are preserved mainly in two collections that date from the fourteenth century AD. Despite this late date, it is clear that many of these manuscripts had their origin in oral tales, spread by peripatetic storytellers. Like the Irish myths (although these are preserved in earlier medieval documents), it is thought that the scribes who wrote down the Welsh mythic stories were Christian clerics operating within monastic houses. Nevertheless, these myths contain much that is overtly pagan and, what is more, have close comparisons with much earlier, pre-Christian material culture that is of a manifestly ritual nature: notable examples include not only reincarnation but also shape-shifting, the sacred power of cauldrons and of human heads. So, it is more than possible that the oral tales whence the texts were drawn, were in circulation centuries earlier than their first written redactions.²

Otherworlds and rebirth: looking forward to medieval Welsh myths

Some of the earliest Welsh medieval mythic stories are contained within *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (or *The Mabinogion*). The themes of rebirth and of existence in another world parallel to that of living humans recur in this literature. I will pick out just two of several: the stories of Pwyll, lord of Arberth (Narberth) and of Brân (or Bendigeidfran – the Blessed Brân). Pwyll's tale (in the *First Branch*) involves his meeting with Arawn, the lord of Annwfn, the Welsh Otherworld. It is a complex narrative, but its essence is the change of places between Pwyll and Arawn: for a year, Arawn will rule in the upper world at Arberth while Pwyll assumes authority over Annwfn. When Pwyll arrives, he beholds a dazzlingly opulent court, all the courtiers and Arawn's wife arrayed in beautiful clothes and jewels. He goes hunting deer with otherworld hounds in the woods by day and in the evening feasts from gold cups and platters. It is as though Pwyll has come upon a total facsimile of his royal court among the living.³

The second, even more powerful, Welsh mythic episode that refers directly to rebirth occurs in the *Second Branch of the Mabinogi*: the story of Brân the Blessed, lord of Harlech in North Wales. One of its centrepieces is a magical cauldron belonging to Brân that can bring the dead back to life if they are immersed in its contents. The tale is a complex one involving warfare between Wales and Ireland, in which Brân tries to avert conflict by making the Irish king, Matholwch, a present of this precious vessel. The gift does not work and, indeed, it is turned against the Welsh ruler, for Matholwch uses the cauldron to resurrect his own warriors slaughtered by his opponents. When dunked in the magical cauldron of rebirth, the Irish soldiers emerge more vigorous fighters than ever; the only *caveat* is that they have lost the power of speech.⁴ This is telling because it appears to mean that the reincarnated dead are not fully human but are zombies that still belong to the underworld (see Figure 30, a and b).

Although, of course, it would be fatuous to make direct connections between Lucan's comments concerning Gaul in the first century AD and an otherworld described in a Welsh medieval myth; it is possible, however, that these mythic tales contained echoes of a past long gone. One channel through which such links might have occurred is the knowledge of Classical literature almost certainly possessed by the educated monks who wrote down (and/or invented) the medieval myths of Wales and Ireland. Another is the long-lived tradition of storytelling and the circulation of memories over long periods of time.⁵ Moreover, it is well known that early



FIGURE 30 Late Iron Age gilded silver cauldron from Gundestrup in Jutland. It is decorated with scenes and divine images, including a 'vat scene' in which an immense 'god' dips a warrior into a vat or cauldron, perhaps to return him to life. Height 42 centimetres, diameter 69 centimetres. © National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

Irish Christian monks regularly took journeys widely within Europe, following the *Peregrinatio pro Dei amore* (the pilgrimage for the love of God). It is likely that Welsh medieval clerics also undertook such journeys and, as they did so, they may well have come across the visible remains of pagan religious customs, including images of disembodied heads, or even ancient cauldrons deposited centuries earlier in watery places, whose water levels might have fallen and exposed them. But it is time to leave medieval Welsh myths and return to the ‘real’ Druids of Iron Age Wales.

Ritual equipment and regalia

These Cimbrian women would enter the army camp, sword in hand, and go up to the prisoners, crown them, and lead them up to a bronze vessel . . . One woman would mount a step and, leaning over the cauldron, cut the throat of a prisoner-of-war, who was held over the vessel’s rim. Others cut open the body and, after inspecting the entrails, would foretell victory for their countrymen.

(STRABO, *GEOGRAPHY*, 7. 2)⁶

This quotation from Strabo neatly encapsulates some of the most significant finds of ritual (perhaps Druidic) material from Iron Age Wales: sacrifice, personal regalia and cauldrons. The religious event among the Germanic Cimbri (whose territory lay in what is now north Germany and southern Denmark) described by the ancient Greek geographer in a few terse phrases opens up a wealth of imagery: the sacrificial context of war, the use of military equipment to dispatch victims, their pre-death crowning, the catching of sacrificial blood in bronze cauldrons and divination. All these elements can be traced in the archaeological record of ancient Druidic Wales, albeit some more tenuous than others.

Cauldrons

The medieval Welsh mythic story *Preiddeu Annwfn* (The Spoils of Annwfn), centres on the British hero Arthur’s visit to the Otherworld and his attempt to steal its magical cauldron. The vessel is described as studded with glittering precious stones, and it is endowed with a capricious persona, such that it takes the breath of nine virgins to heat its contents, and refuses to boil food for anyone reputed to be cowardly.⁷ I wonder whether it is possible to link the cauldron of Annwfn – at least very loosely – to archaeological

evidence. For this we must travel back to the earliest Iron Age in Wales and to a remote, mountain-girt site in the heart of the south Welsh valleys: Llyn Fawr, near Rhigos where, in the seventh century BC, someone (or a group of people) sank a pair of sheet-bronze cauldrons, filled with bronze and iron objects, into a sacred lake as a votive gift to the gods.⁸ What makes me think of this early site in relation to the medieval myth of *Preiddeu Annwfn* is the physicality of the better-preserved of the two Llyn Fawr cauldrons, for it is studded with dozens of faceted rivets, far more than would be necessary in order to hold the bronze sheets together, and each of these studs, when new and polished, would have reflected the light like diamonds.

Two Welsh cauldron deposits have much in common despite the disparity in their dates. Llyn Fawr belongs to the earliest Iron Age: the iron objects suggest their manufacture by bronze-smiths unfamiliar with the new metal.⁹ While some of the metalwork deposited at Llyn Fawr belonged to the seventh century BC, there is comparative evidence that the cauldrons themselves were older, perhaps by 100 years or more, meaning that they may have been curated or kept as sacred heirlooms for long periods before being ‘sacrificed’ in the holy lake. The later cauldron finds come from Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey. Like Llyn Fawr, this was a remote watery site into which precious objects were cast, including military equipment (there were a sword and spear from Llyn Fawr). But the two deposits have another – highly significant – feature in common, namely the presence in each of not just one but a pair of cauldrons. These vessels would have been highly prized possessions, used for cooking joints of meat for communal feasting. In ancient Greek animal sacrificial rituals, the cooked meat was shared between the gods and the people.¹⁰ Might these pairs of ancient Welsh cauldrons have been deposited for a similarly binary purpose? The possible interpretation of Druids in terms of shamanism has been touched upon in earlier chapters. One of the characteristics of shamans in many cultures – past and present – is their ability to transgress the boundaries between the material and spiritual worlds. Maybe the presence of two cauldrons in these sacred Welsh pools represented aspects of Druidic/shamanic behaviour, a signature designed to mark the crossing of thresholds or even to reflect the transgressive process of the cauldron between the realms of human and divine. And cauldrons were not the only paired objects associated with Iron Age ritual, as witnessed below.

Spoons and tankards

In his *Guide Catalogue of the Early Iron Age Collections*, Hubert Savory mentioned the late Iron Age bronze spoons in the National Museum as ‘less

attractive pieces'.¹¹ To my mind, they are nothing of the sort. The inner surfaces of the spoons from Castell Nadolig (Cardiganshire) (see Figure 31) are plain but for two small holes – one in the bowl of each, and two scratched-on lines intersecting at right angles on one of them – but both their handles were highly decorated with swirling La Tène designs.¹²

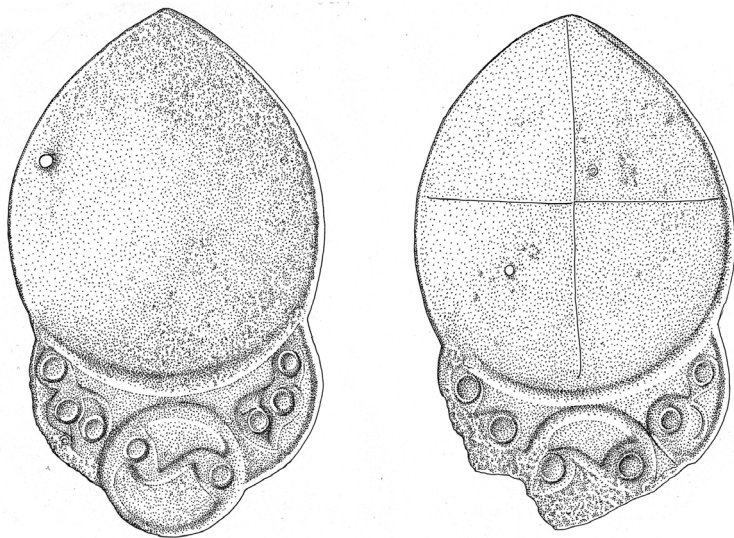


FIGURE 31 Pair of late Iron Age bronze 'divination' spoons, from Castell Nadolig, Cardiganshire. Length 13 centimetres. © Nick Griffiths.

I do not, at the moment, want to go into the details of what the holes and quadrant may have meant, for that is discussed in Chapter Seven, but the position of the ornamentation is interesting. It recurs on other pairs of similar spoons from graves or bogs in Britain, including those deliberately deposited in a marsh at Crosby Ravensworth in Cumbria.¹³ The Castell Nadolig spoons were discovered in 1829 beneath a cairn of stones within an Iron Age hillfort.¹⁴ If the original record is correct, then they, too, were ritually deposited. Spoons like this might have held liquids such as wine or oil, perhaps drip-fed through the holes onto altars or sacrificial offerings.¹⁵

The disposition of La Tène decoration on the spoons, with only the handles chosen for art, is present on other sacred objects in Wales, most notably on the large late Iron Age tankard made of yew-wood staves sheathed in a thin sheet of beaten bronze, utterly plain except for the elaborately La Tène-decorated handle, from a bog at Trawsfynydd in Denbighshire.¹⁶

Like cauldrons, such large tankards would have been used in ceremonial feasts, similar to the symposia practised in ancient Greece, with liquor passed between guests to reinforce relationships between high-ranking individuals. The handles of the spoons and the tankard may have been chosen for special decorative treatment precisely because, as argued in the previous chapter, La Tène art was imbued with spiritual energy which transmitted a sacred charge to the hands of those who held them.

Crowns and headdresses

The idea of a special connection between art and the person who touched the spoon and tankard handles has a parallel with the decorated headband worn by the ‘warrior-priest’ buried at Mill Hill Deal, Kent in the third to second century BC.¹⁷ This was not part of a helmet but fitted as a diadem so that it touched the skin all round his head (see Figure 32).



FIGURE 32 Skull of a young man buried in the Iron Age cemetery at Mill Hill, Deal, Kent, with his decorated bronze diadem. © Paul Jenkins.

That this person was special is displayed by his lavishly decorated military gear and by the separation of his grave from the others within the cemetery. I allude to the Deal diadem here because, in its clearly ceremonial function, it bears broad comparison with the highly ornamental headdress

found in a cist grave at Cerrig-y-Drudion in Denbighshire. The stone cist contained the remains of a person who died in the fourth century BC. The object was originally interpreted as a 'hanging bowl' because of its suspension loops.¹⁸ But its splendid reconstruction, undertaken as part of the 'Technologies of Enchantment' project,¹⁹ and subsequent display in the wonderful (alas now closed) Origins Gallery in the National Museum Wales, reveals that it consisted of a conical 'hat', made of leather sheathed in sheet-bronze ornamented with La Tène motifs. The headdress was topped with a horse-hair plume, and two bronze chains terminating in model wheels would have hung down on either side of the face,²⁰ clinking and catching the sunlight as its wearer moved (see Figure 33).



FIGURE 33 Reconstructed bronze and leather headdress belonging to a man who died in the fourth century BC and was buried at Cerrig-y-Drudion, Denbighshire. © National Museum of Wales.

It is hard to see this elaborate piece of headgear as other than for ceremonial use, and it is tempting to interpret its owner as a priest, perhaps an ancestor of Anglesey's Druids who fought so hard to guard the holy island from the Roman assault. The wheel amulets on the Cerrig-y-Drudion head-dress call to mind ritual headgear from a Romano-British temple site at Wanborough (Surrey), where the remains of chain-and-wheel headdresses, once mounted on leather caps, were discovered during excavations there in the 1980s.²¹

Before leaving the subject of headdresses, it is worth casting a glance back at a comment in the opening quote from Strabo concerning the sacrifice of Cimbrian prisoners of war that, to my knowledge, has never been examined, namely the crowning of these victims before their throats were cut. Perhaps these adornments were simply wreaths made from local plants or the twigs of trees, or might they have been more elaborate head-pieces made of metal? Whatever form such 'crowns' took, it seems as if such prisoners were deliberately dressed up in order to raise their status for sacrifice, just as animals were prepared by ritualists for sacrifice in the Classical world, by gilding their horns, decorating them with garlands and waving palm fronds over them to bless them.²²

Ceremony and sacrifice at Llyn Cerrig Bach

The discovery of over 170 ancient bronze and iron objects found at Llyn Cerrig Bach during the construction of RAF Valley in 1943 remains one of the most important Iron Age discoveries in Britain, and certainly in Wales. The material from the small boggy lake appears to have been deliberately thrown into what must have been a sacred pool, as votive offerings.²³ The site is mentioned several times in this book, not least in this current chapter whose previous section described the pair of cauldrons found as part of the offerings. But here I want to zoom in on three elements in the assemblage that provide imaginative clues as to what might have gone on at Llyn Cerrig as orchestrated by priests, who may well have been Druids. The first connects, once again, with Strabo's Cimbrian priestesses, for there is clear evidence that prisoners were present at this remote island sanctuary: the presence of two wrought-iron chains linking multiple neck rings, each made by a different blacksmith (Figure 15). The complete and more massive chain has rings for five captives; the second is lighter, with smaller links.²⁴ The necks of those imprisoned would only have been 2 feet (60 centimetres) apart and each would have had to bend the neck and shuffle forward in a deliberately degrading and dehumanizing manner.²⁵ It is tempting to think that the occupants of the chains were prisoners of

war, and the casting of their chains into the sacred pool was a devotional act. But we will never know whether the captives themselves were slain, perhaps drowned, in the holy lake. Their bodies have not been found, although some human bone has been identified from the site.²⁶

Religious ritual and music, in whatever form, are strongly connected in many of the world's belief systems, past and present. Music played an important role in sacrificial ceremonies. In ancient Greece, the followers of Apollo and Dionysos quarrelled over the differing styles of their devotional choral songs.²⁷ The Greek author Plutarch made a chilling comment concerning child sacrifice among the Carthaginians, describing how the ceremonies were thronged with musicians whose job it was to play so loudly that the hapless victims' cries could not be heard by worshippers, and for fear that the sounds would invoke the gods' displeasure and so bring ill luck on the proceedings.²⁸ A significant find from the Llyn Cerrig Bach assemblage was part of a trumpet.²⁹ It is fragmentary but it chimes with later Iron Age ceremonial trumpets from Northern Ireland, notably those from Loughnashade (Figure 13), a small lake at the foot of the hill where Navan Fort (later to become the sacred assembly site of Emhain Macha) was built. That Navan itself was an important ceremonial place is shown by the construction of a great wooden monument made of oak stakes in the early first century BC, which was entombed in a stone cairn, covered with turf and deliberately burnt to the ground shortly afterwards. Archaeologists investigating Navan also made the significant find of a skull belonging to a Barbary Ape, the macaque almost certainly brought all the way from north Africa or Gibraltar in an act of gift-exchange between far-flung lords.³⁰ The beautifully crafted La Tène-decorated horns found at Loughnashade were deliberately deposited as a ritual act, and it is tempting to think of their being blown at significant ceremonies in Navan before their placement in holy water. A similar 'biography' might be imagined for the incomplete trumpet at Llyn Cerrig (see Figure 34), which might even have been purposely broken before its immersion, in order to 'kill' it and ease its passage into the next world.



FIGURE 34 Fragment of a ceremonial bronze trumpet from the ritual deposit at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. © National Museum of Wales.

The presence of religious practitioners here is affirmed by the discovery of several sheet-bronze spiral-twisted ‘ribbons’.³¹ These are almost certainly bindings originally wound around staves made of ash, their most likely function being as ceremonial sceptres or wands of religious office (see Figure 35). Although these objects might have had a ‘secular’ use as badges of rank for chiefs, the argument for their religious character is strengthened by similar finds from Romano-British temples, most notably the sheet-bronze ribbon from Farley Heath in Surrey, which was covered with incised images of deities, animals and symbols.³² This shrine was built around a sacred spring, another watery sanctuary.

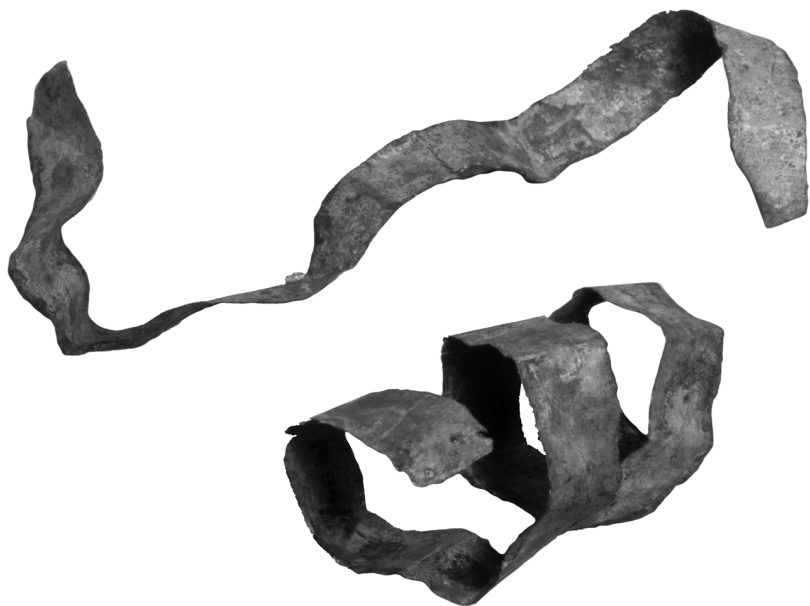


FIGURE 35 Bronze sceptre-bindings from the ritual deposit at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. © National Museum of Wales.

The use of sceptres on religious sites in Roman Britain is widely recorded: perhaps the most notable is the temple at Wanborough, also in Surrey, where excavations undertaken in the mid-1980s produced not only the wheel-decorated chain-headaddresses mentioned earlier in this chapter but also evidence for multiple bronze sceptres, suggesting that a number of priests may have been officiating at ceremonies here.³³

‘Oracle’ Stones

The (probably) Iron Age stone head from Bryn y Môr Farm on Anglesey (Figure 26) is notable for its large size and the ‘chinstrap’ motif just beneath the chin (see Chapter Four).³⁴ However, it has one further feature that has relevance to ritual ‘performance’, namely the apparently open lips, as if it is speaking. Another stone head-carving from Anglesey, found on farmland at Hen-Dŷ³⁵ also has this feature; this one’s lips are curved, giving it an even more realistic representation of speech (see Figure 36).



FIGURE 36 Stone head from Hen-Dŷ, Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll, Anglesey. Height 45 centimetres. © (on loan to Oriel Ynys Môn through the generosity of the late Mrs Eluned Ollosson from Hen-Dŷ and her family).

While the Bryn y Môr image is a disembodied (or severed) head, the one from Hen-Dŷ is carved from a large chunk of roughly hewn stone, which gives it the somewhat disturbing impression of having burst out through the rock. Wide-open but lipless mouths are also present on two Roman-period images from the Silurian tribal capital, Caerwent. Both were made from coarse local sandstone: one is a disembodied head, the other represents the complete body of a seated women, with a grossly exaggerated head and tiny limbs. The head comes from a private 'shrine' in the garden of a high-status Roman house;³⁶ the female statuette from deep in a pit near a temple. While the head has been dated to the fourth century AD and the statuette a century earlier, my own research suggests that they were the work of the same sculptor and that the head was 'curated' for 100 years before its eventual deposition. The faces are remarkably similar, each with circular eyes and mouths open in an oval shape.³⁷

The open mouths displayed by these heads leads me to wonder whether they might have functioned as 'oracle' stones that Druids could have spoken behind, as if mouthpieces for the gods. Fanciful as this might appear, there is some evidence that this kind of thing was going on in Roman Britain. In 2010 archaeologists working on the Antonine Wall in East Lothian discovered a Mithraeum just outside the fort of Inveresk. Inside were two altars dedicated to Mithras and the sun-god Sol respectively and, oddly, these had been buried face down. Both altars were expertly carved with divine images but the one dedicated to the sun-god had something extra, namely an iron rod at the back of the god's head that seems to have acted to manipulate the nose and mouth so as to enable the transmission of sounds, such as breathing and speech.³⁸ Even without such sophisticated devices, might it be that the open-mouthed stone heads from Wales were likewise used by local religious practitioners not so much to dupe worshippers but to demonstrate their power and their close relationship with the spirits?

Caves, bogs and shrines

The remote cave of Culver Hole on Gower has already been mentioned in the Prologue and Chapter Three, so there is no need to allude to it here other than briefly. But its repeated use for the deposition of female figurines over centuries – from the earliest Iron Age to the Roman period – serves as a reminder of the sacred longevity of holy space. The image of the little bronze 'goddess' with her elaborate lunar headdress (Figure 1) may have been placed in the darkness in reflection of the moon at night,

and the cave itself might have been perceived as a ‘shamanic’ space with permeable access between human and divine worlds. And later, someone else – a priest or worshipper – came here to deposit another little image, of a nursing mother, perhaps in the belief and hope that this hallowed spot would serve to mobilize spiritual aid to a pilgrim or a community.

Whilst not strictly speaking in Wales, it is pertinent here to glance again at the Lindow Men, the two bog bodies, mentioned earlier in this book. I think it is right to regard Lindow Moss as a sacred space and, like the Culver Hole Cave, it was a dark place that was dangerous, and its miasmic mists and sporadic flaring of gases would have appeared redolent with spiritual energy. The forensic evidence indicates that these men were tortured and one, at least, was kept in a near-death state for a period of time before his final demise by being drowned in the bog. The presence of not just one but two people in this remote marsh strongly suggests that the Lindow bog was special. Just how special its location may have been is a theme picked up in Chapter Six.

There is little evidence for built sanctuaries in Iron Age Wales and it is probably the case that most shrines were natural places, such as caves and bogs, as we have seen, or sacred groves, as chronicled by Lucan and Tacitus. But the Romano-British temple at Gwehelog near Usk may well have had Iron Age antecedents. It is a round, probably a once towered, stone structure within a *temenos* (ritual enclosure). Its circularity suggests influence by native British habits (referencing the pervasive Iron Age roundhouse tradition); and its eccentric positioning within its *temenos* hints at the presence of an earlier structure nearby.³⁹ It is striking that examples of the standard concentric square or rectangular ‘Romano-Celtic’ temple are so rare in Wales. A massively built one of second century AD date is recorded at Carmarthen.⁴⁰ But it was not until about AD 330 that the finest example, erected in the Silurian capital at Caerwent, was built.⁴¹ It may be that by then the Druids had long faded from active religious practice. But it is always possible that they remained as an alternative cult movement, albeit with an invisible footprint. And we have the testimony of Ausonius for the presence of Druids in Gaul in the fourth century AD.⁴² But this priesthood was certainly very active in the mid-first century AD, some twenty years after the Claudian invasion and the initial annexation of Britannia as a Roman province. Their role as a powerful subversive anti-Roman sect is explored in the next chapter.

Notes

- ¹ Lucan, *The Pharsalia*; trans. Robert Graves, *Lucan, Pharsalia: Dramatic Episodes of the Civil Wars* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), p. 38
- ² The two principal collections of Welsh mythological tales are preserved in the White Book of Rhydderch and the Red Book of Hergest. For information about their origins and for an excellent up-to-date translation of the myths from Welsh into English, see Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For synopses and general explanation, see Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *The Celtic Myths* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015b), pp. 17–19 and 77–97; Miranda Aldhouse-Green and Ray Howell, *Celtic Wales*, 2nd edition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), pp. 127–49.
- ³ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 3–6.
- ⁴ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 22–34.
- ⁵ M. J. Green, 'Back to the Future: resonances of the past in myth and material culture', in A. Gazin-Schwartz and C. Holtorf (eds), *Archaeology and Folklore* (London: Routledge, 1999a), pp. 48–66. Very long-lived traditions in other cultures, that survive by continuity or continual hand-downs of memory include those of First Nation North Americans: see, for example, Mark St Pierre and Tilda Long Soldier, *Walking in the Sacred Manner: Healers, Dreamers and Pipe Carriers – Medicine Women of the Plains Indians* (New York: Touchstone: Simon & Schuster, 1995). For longevity in archaeological mythoritual traditions, see rock-art studies, for example, in South African San and First Nation Australian (Aboriginal) culture: David Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in Southern San Rock Paintings* (London: Academic Press, 1981); G. Chaloupka, 'You gotta have style', in M. Lorblanchet and P. G. Bahn (eds), *Rock Art Studies: The Post-Stylistic Era, or Where do We Go From Here?* (Oxford: Oxbow Monograph 35, 1993), pp. 77–98; D. Welch, 'Stylistic change in the Kimberley rock art, Australia', in Lorblanchet and Bahn, *Rock-Art Studies*, pp. 99–114.
- ⁶ Strabo, *Geography*, 7. 2. 3; trans. H. L. Jones, *The Geography of Strabo* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Edition, 1924).
- ⁷ M. Haycock, 'Preiddeu Annwn. The figure of Taliesin', *Studia Celtica*, 18 (1983), 52–78; M. J. Green, 'Vessels of Death: Sacred Cauldrons in Archaeology and Myth', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 78 (1998b), 63–84.
- ⁸ Hubert Savory, *Guide Catalogue of the Bronze Age Collections (in the National Museum of Wales)*, (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1980), nos. 291–4; Andrew Reynolds, 'The Llyn Fawr Hoard and its Legacy', (unpublished MA thesis, University of Wales, Newport, 2000).
- ⁹ Bronze-smiths used casting whereas iron had to be wrought. The smiths experimenting with iron, at the cusp of the Bronze and Iron Ages at first tried to imitate casting techniques in wrought iron, for instance by fashioning sockets for the sickle and spearhead found at Llyn Fawr. Growing familiarity with wrought iron developed the use of tangs to attach metal to wood rather than the much more laborious process of making sockets.

- ¹⁰ Aldhouse-Green and Howell 2017, p. 37; M. Detienne, 'Culinary practice and the spirit of sacrifice', in M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant (eds), *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 1–20.
- ¹¹ Savory, *Guide Catalogue of the Early Iron Age Collections*, pp. 40–1.
- ¹² Savory, *Guide Catalogue of the Early Iron Age Collections*, p. 106, fig. 36, no. 4.
- ¹³ A. Fitzpatrick, 'Les Druides en Grande-Bretagne', in V. Guichard and F. Perrin (eds), *Les Druides* (Paris: l'Archéologie Nouvelle, L'Archéologue Hors Série 2, 2000), pp. 47–9, picture on p. 49.
- ¹⁴ Savory, *Guide Catalogue of the Early Iron Age Collections*, p. 61.
- ¹⁵ Spoons appear in late Roman archaeological contexts, such as the Thetford hoard, which contained more than thirty silver spoons, some inscribed with the names of obscure British deities. Catherine Johns and Timothy Potter, *The Thetford Treasure* (London: British Museum Publications, 1983). For general discussion of late Roman silver tableware, including spoons, see K. S. Painter, 'Silver hoards from Britain in their late Roman context', *Antiquité Tardive*, 5, (1997), 93–110.
- ¹⁶ Christopher Arnold and Jeffrey Davies, *Roman and Early Medieval Wales* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 126.
- ¹⁷ Keith Parfitt, *Iron Age Burials at Mill Hill Deal* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 18–20, and frontispiece.
- ¹⁸ Savory, *Guide Catalogue of the Early Iron Age Collections*, pp. 26–7, fig. 5.
- ¹⁹ See Prologue.
- ²⁰ M. J. Aldhouse-Green, 'Reading Runes, Telling Spoons: Priests, Ritual and Magic in Iron Age and Roman Britannia', in S. Alfayé Villa and F. Pina Polo (eds), *Gods, Priests and Magicians in the Ancient World/Dioses, Sacerdotes y Magos en el mundo antiguo. Homenaje a Francisco Marco Simón, Bandue: Journal of the Spanish Association for the Sciences of Religions*, Special Collection 11 (Madrid) (2018–19), pp. 147–61. D. Garrow, 'The space and time of Celtic Art: interrogating the 'Technologies of Enchantment database'', in D. Garrow, C. Gosden and J. D. Hill (eds), *Rethinking Celtic Art* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2008), pp. 15–39. C. Gosden and J. D. Hill, 'Introduction: re-integrating 'Celtic' art', in *Rethinking Celtic Art*, pp. 1–14.
- ²¹ M. G. O'Connell and J. Bird, 'The Roman temple at Wanborough, excavation 1985–1986', *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, 82 (1994), 1–168; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 156, fig. 48.
- ²² Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 56; John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1970), p. 156, pl. 36.
- ²³ Cyril Fox, *A Find of the Early Iron Age from Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1946); Philip Macdonald, *Llyn Cerrig Bach: A Study of the Copper Alloy Artefacts from the Insular La Tène Assemblage* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007); Philip Steele, *Llyn Cerrig Bach: Treasure from the Iron Age* (Llangefni, Oriel Ynys Môn, 2012).
- ²⁴ Cyril Fox, *Llyn Cerrig Bach*, pp. 37–8, pls X, XI, XXXVII.

- ²⁵ Experiments using Cardiff University students encased in the neck rings shows this to startling effect: M. J. Aldhouse-Green, 'Semiologies of Subjugation: the Ritualisation of War-Prisoners in Later European Antiquity', in T. Otto, H. Thrane and H. Vandkilde (eds), *Warfare and Society: Archaeological and Social Anthropological Perspectives* (Århus: Århus University Press, 2006b), pp. 281–304, fig. 2 (p. 283). Stone images from the Roman period show such slave-chains in use. A good example is from the Roman military installation at Mainz (M. J. Aldhouse-Green, 'Chaining and Shaming: images of defeat, from Llyn Cerrig Bach to Sarmitzegetusa', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 23 (3) (2004b), 319–40, fig. 3 (p. 326); E. Hugh Thompson, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Duckworth, 2003), p. 10, fig. 3.
- ²⁶ Macdonald, *Llyn Cerrig Bach*, p. 173.
- ²⁷ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 224.
- ²⁸ Plutarch, *De Superstitione*, 13, 171d; Roland De Vaux, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), pp. 79–81; Shelby Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in their Mediterranean Context* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 159–62.
- ²⁹ Fox, *Llyn Cerrig Bach*, p. 44, no. 74, pl. XXXI.
- ³⁰ C. J. Lynn, 'The Iron Age Mound in Navan Fort: A Physical Realisation of Celtic Beliefs?', *Emania*, 10 (1992), 33–57; C. J. Lynn, 'Hostels, Heroes and Tales: Further Thoughts on the Navan Mound', *Emania*, 12 (1994), 5–20; Barry Rafferty, *Pagan Celtic Ireland* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), pp. 62, 101, 180 and 226.
- ³¹ Fox, *Llyn Cerrig Bach*, pp. 45–6, nos 67, 91 and 133; pl. XVI.
- ³² R. Poulton, 'Farley Heath Temple', *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, 93 (2007), pp. 1–147; R. G. Goodchild, 'A priest's sceptre from the Romano-Celtic Temple at Farley Heath, Surrey', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 18 (1938), 391–6.
- ³³ O'Connell and Bird, 'The Roman Temple at Wanborough', 107–21, with figures and pls.
- ³⁴ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 139.
- ³⁵ Steele, *Llyn Cerrig Bach*, p. 38.
- ³⁶ G. C. Boon, 'The shrine of the head', in G. C. Boon and J. M. Lewis (eds), *Welsh Antiquity* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1976), pp. 163–77.
- ³⁷ M. J. Aldhouse-Green, '"Singing Stones": Contexting Body-Language in Romano-British Iconography', *Britannia*, 43 (2012), pp. 115–34.
- ³⁸ F. Hunter, M. Henig, E. Sauer and J. Gooder, 'Mithras in Scotland: a Mithraeum at Inveresk (East Lothian)', *Britannia*, 47 (2016), 119–68.
- ³⁹ Christopher Arnold and Jeffrey Davies, *Roman and Early Medieval Wales* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), pp. 127–30, figure 11.2A; D. R. Wilson, 'Air reconnaissance of Roman Wales, 1969–86', in Barry Burnham and Jeffrey Davies (eds), *Conquest, Co-existence and Change: Recent Work in Roman Wales* (Lampeter: Trivium 25, 1990), pp. 10–18, pl. 8. For parallels with the circular wooden late Iron Age sanctuary, replaced by a more massive stone (but still round) temple in the early Roman period at Hayling Island, see Chapter Three in this volume.

⁴⁰ Arnold and Davies, *Roman and Early Medieval Wales*, p. 129.

⁴¹ Richard Brewer, *Caerwent Roman Town*, 3rd edition (Cardiff: Cadw, 2006), p. 45.

⁴² Ausonius, *Commemoratio Professorum Burdigalensium*, 1.4–1.10.

Chapter Six

A HOLY WAR: BOUDICA AND THE DRUIDS AGAINST ROME

Having made her speech, Boudica then engaged in a type of divination by releasing a hare from the fold of her tunic, and since it ran on what was for them the lucky side, the whole mass of people shouted for joy and Boudica raised her hand to heaven and said: 'I thank you, Andraste, and I call upon you, woman to woman.'

(DIO CASSIUS, *ROMAN HISTORY*, 62. 6)¹

In December 2019, I took part in a film shoot for the Smithsonian Channel television series *Mystic Britain*.² The presenter Mary-Ann Ochota and I were reconstructing the scene quoted above and the star of the show was a giant, hare-sized Belgian rabbit named Humbug (see Figure 37). Although the rabbit appeared quite docile and placid at first, it proved remarkably difficult to get him to co-operate, and he objected strongly to



FIGURE 37 'Humbug', the Belgian rabbit masquerading as Boudica's hare, in the Smithsonian Television series *Mystic Britain*, December 2019. © Author. By permission of Blink Films.

over-handling, so we spent precious shoot-time pursuing Humbug around his pen. Given that this rabbit was ‘tame’, and was used to people, this ‘re-enactment’ scene served to demonstrate that hare-handling might well have been a challenge. Hares are large, muscular creatures, with powerful hind legs, designed for kicking. Was Boudica’s hare tame? Was Dio Cassius’s account true or a fake story?

Dio Cassius wrote his *Roman History* in the first half of the third century AD, nearly two centuries after the Boudican Rebellion of AD 60. However, his detailed narrative of the seismic events in the fledgling Roman province of Britannia probably derives, at least in part, from lost earlier texts, and is likely to contain at least some veracity. This chapter considers the possible part that the Druids played in Boudica’s revolt and, to do that, it is necessary to sketch a brief outline of how events unfurled during this momentous year in Romano-British history.³ In the two decades after the Claudian invasion of Britannia in AD 43, the south-eastern tribes fell into two categories: those whose rulers and people supported and benefited from the new Roman regime; and others whose resentment and hostility boiled over into open resistance. Of the latter group, the epicentres of insurrection lay in the territories of the Trinovantes (mainly in Essex) and the East Anglian Iceni to their north. Initially it was the former who had most cause for disquiet, for much of their tribal capital, Camulodunum (Colchester) was requisitioned to house Roman veteran soldiers, who were given parcels of Trinovantian land. If that were not enough to bear, Claudius built a massive stone temple dedicated to the Roman Imperial Cult right in the town’s centre. Not only was this a grossly insensitive display of triumphant *romanitas* but to add insult to injury, the Trinovantes had to pay for it to be constructed and maintained and to provide its priests, the *Seviri Augustales*. So, their grievances were many, making them ripe for an alliance with their neighbours to the north, the Iceni and Boudica.

Tacitus’ testimony reveals that the Iceni first rebelled against Rome in AD 47–48, when Ostorius Scapula was governor of Britannia.⁴ So, Icenian unease about the new regime was made clear only a short time after the initial Claudian invasion. But at the same time that the Trinovantes were ‘coming to the boil’, something momentous happened to their north: the Icenian ruler, Prasutagus, suddenly died. Prasutagus was a ‘client-king’ of Rome’s. Put simply, this means that he, along with others, entered into a personal alliance with the Roman emperor, designed to be of mutual benefit: a ‘friendly’ native ruler pledged his support to the empire, and undertook to keep his people in line; in return, Rome guaranteed to

protect client-kings or queens from being unseated by their own people and granted them certain privileges, including Roman citizenship and probably also good trade deals and some tax immunities. In terms of the Icenian situation, it is important to emphasize that this ‘special relationship’ was between an individual native ruler and Rome (as represented by the reigning emperor) only. So, when client-rulers died, the alliance became invalid until a new treaty had been arranged (or not) with their successor. It is worth pointing out that alliances made between Rome and client-rulers by no means always worked in the latter’s favour!

When Prasutagus died, his widow, either wilfully or mistakenly, assumed the leadership of the Iceni. This put her on a collision course with Rome. Prasutagus left a will leaving his estate – an extremely wealthy one – jointly to the emperor Nero and to his daughters. (Could it be that the omission of his wife, Boudica, from his legacy was due to her hostility to Rome, so apparently divergent from the Icenian king’s own sentiments?) However, the Roman finance officer in Britain, Decianus Catus, took it upon himself to take soldiers with him to plunder the tribe’s wealth and, when Boudica resisted, had the queen flogged and had her daughters raped.⁵ These acts of violation ignited the Boudican revolt; helping to fuel the flames was the absence of the governor Suetonius Paulinus, who had taken the greater part of his army with him to annihilate the Druidic *sanctum sanctorum* far away on Anglesey, thereby leaving south-east Britain vulnerable to native rebel forces.

Aversion sacrifice at Lindow Moss: druidic intervention?

The Druids – that is what they call their magicians – hold nothing more sacred than mistletoe and a tree on which it is growing, provided it is a robur [hard-oak] . . . Mistletoe is, however, rather seldom found on a hard-oak, and when it is discovered it is gathered with great ceremony, and particularly on the sixth day of the moon.

(PLINY, *NATURAL HISTORY*, 16. 95)⁶

It is my contention that events at opposite ends of Britannia in AD 60 were connected and that it was not by happenstance that Paulinus’ assault on Anglesey coincided with the flare-up in the Trinovantian and Icenian territories north of the Thames. I suspect that the Druids may have helped to orchestrate the Boudican rebellion, in the hope that

when word reached the Roman governor, he would turn his back on the holy island and march to rescue the conquered south-east. Another possible Druidic attempt to divert attention from Anglesey was the sacrifice of at least one of the persons killed and deposited at Lindow Moss in Cheshire (see Figure 38), although the ‘evidence’ is purely circumstantial. If Suetonius Paulinus led his forces directly from south-east England to Anglesey, off the north-west coast of Wales, the most direct route would have passed close to Lindow. Could it be that Lindow Man, whose body was discovered in August 1984, was an aversion sacrifice, a last-ditch desperate attempt to persuade the gods to prevent the violation and destruction of the Druids’ holy of holies?

Lindow Man probably died somewhere around the mid-first century AD.⁷ He was a young, fit man, about 25 years old and his well-preserved



FIGURE 38 The body of a young late Iron Age man found in a peat bog at Lindow Moss, Cheshire. © the Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

hands revealed no trace of manual labour. That and his razor-trimmed beard suggest that he had enjoyed high status. Yet when he died, he was naked but for an armlet made of fox fur, and the body had no grave goods interred with it in the marsh. The manner of his killing and the contents of his gut are highly suggestive of sacrificial murder (see Chapter Three). He received a stunning blow to his head, had been garrotted and his throat was cut – a ‘triple killing’ that was far more violent than was necessary to kill him. And Lindow Man last ate a kind of griddled bread made of a wide variety of seeds, as well as cereal grains and other plant matter, including mistletoe,⁸ suggestive of a special final meal. Given Pliny’s description of the Druidic mistletoe-oak-moon ritual, is Druidic involvement in Lindow Man’s death a reasonable theory? It is impossible to be certain but the manner of his death and bog burial, the final mistletoe-containing meal and the geographical position of the marsh carry a certain interpretative weight. And a search for understanding of this peculiar killing can legitimately include a suggestion that Lindow Man was sacrificed here by Druids in a desperate bid to save the remote, untamed and edgy sacred island of Anglesey from desecration and destruction. If so it was, alas, unsuccessful and the Roman gods of war prevailed against Britain’s Druid-served deities.

Boudica: ruler *and* druid?

To begin with, Dumnorix proceeded to use every kind of reason to support his request to be left behind in Gaul. He said that he was not used to sailing and was afraid of the sea, and also that religious considerations prevented him.

(CAESAR, *DE BELLO GALLICO*, 5. 6)⁹

What has this quotation from Julius Caesar’s war diaries to do with either Boudica or the Druids? Well, Caesar’s staunch Gallic ally during the Gallic Wars of 58–50 BC was Diviciacus, ruler of the Aedui, a tribe whose territory lay in what is now Burgundy in eastern Gaul.¹⁰ Although Caesar himself does not mention the Aeduan leader’s religious status, Cicero does. The Roman orator met him in 60 BC, when the Gallic king visited Rome to petition the Senate to help him fend off the Helvetii, who were threatening his lands. And Cicero specifically chronicled his respect for Diviciacus’ divinatory skills, calling him a Druid.¹¹ His brother Dumnorix, as fervently anti-Rome as Diviciacus was pro-Caesar, is never identified as a Druid *per se*

but, as the quotation above indicates, he did apparently have religious duties as well as being a high-ranking Aeduan chieftain too.

If the Aeduan brothers combined political and religious duties, might Boudica herself (Figure 9) also have been both queen and Druid? While earlier Roman authors allude to Druids as always male (perhaps reflecting the most important Roman priests), later writers, such as those who contributed to the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, speak of Druidesses (see Chapter One). In Roman eyes she was merely the widow of a client-king but, to her people, she reigned in her own right after Prasutagus's death. And, so, the quotation at the beginning of this chapter swims into focus. According to Dio Cassius, Boudica did possess divination skills. The use of a hare as her animal-helper is a very shamanic device.¹² Traditional shamans frequently rely on animals to act on their behalf in their liaisons with the spirit world. Was Dio chronicling the manipulation of a beast in order to give Boudica the answer that she wanted – a prediction of victory over the Romans – or was she acting in good faith as a Druid-shaman? The hare was an interesting choice: it forages at night and has been symbolically associated with the moon (see Figure 39).



FIGURE 39 Gold bowl, depicting a hare, deer and moons, from Zurich Altstetten; sixth century BC. © Schweizerisches Landesmuseum.

Pliny (above) makes a connection between Druids and the lunar cycle, and Caesar¹³ comments on the significance of night upon the Gauls and their belief that they were descended from the god of night, Dis Pater. I wonder, too, whether Boudica chose the hare in performing her ritual and prayers to Andraste, goddess of victory because of the hare's reputation

for combat ('boxing')¹⁴, acts that are particularly prevalent when the moon is full. And, of course, there is Caesar's telling remark that in Britannia it was forbidden to kill and eat hares, geese or chickens, presumably because they were in some way sacred.¹⁵ Archaeological evidence has revealed Iron Age burials of these creatures, interred whole, with no signs of butchery.¹⁶

Boudica's revenge: a tale of three cities

Relying on the protection of the temple and hampered by clandestine accomplices in the rebellion who thwarted their plans, the veterans constructed neither defensive ditch nor rampart . . . Heedless of precaution, as though all around was peace and quiet, they found themselves surrounded by the hordes of barbarians, and when all else had been laid waste and burned at the (first onset), the temple, in which the [Roman] garrison had been concentrated, was taken by storm after a two-day siege'
(TACITUS, *ANNALS*, 14. 32)¹⁷

Tacitus's graphic narrative conjures up a truly awful image of terror. Suetonius Paulinus' march on Anglesey had left the Roman cities of Colchester, London and Verulamium defenceless. Even the veteran soldiers settled in Colchester were caught by surprise and had failed to make efforts to fortify the garrison town against Boudica's rebel British army. Temples and other holy places have always signified sanctuary, and it was therefore particularly shocking that even the massive stone temple, erected to the spirit of the emperor Claudius and Rome, could not withstand its destructive power but was stormed and set on fire, killing all who sheltered within its sacred walls. Given the Trinovantes' resentment at the construction of the great temple, together with the financial liability it posed, it is not surprising that it was an object of special hatred and vengeance. There is archaeological evidence for the sacking of the temple by fire, along with large portions of the city, together with the two other principal Roman-founded cities of Verulamium and Londinium. But at the temple to the imperial cult at Colchester, British anger was not confined to the building itself but also to the life-size bronze equestrian statue of Claudius that stood outside. In what appears to me to be a violent ritual killing, the image of the emperor was beheaded, and the head deposited in the river Alde, not far away in Suffolk. Nothing more of the

statue has been recovered, except for one of the bronze horse's hooves that was hacked off its body and carried off to Ashill in Norfolk where it appears to have been buried as part of a votive deposit. But I wonder, too, whether the decapitated head of the emperor was something more than a merely contemptuous tossing away of a hated symbol. Given the importance of the human head in Iron Age European sacred tradition (see Chapter Four), it is possible that the severed head at one and the same time represented the conquest and degradation of the emperor – and all he stood for – and the subversion of his image to be reborn as a gift to the local gods.¹⁸ The destruction of the hated temple and its statue raises questions concerning who may have been behind such desecration. Alongside Boudica's army, it is a plausible theory that the Druids were involved, not necessarily on the front line but as whippers-up of berserk fury in an event that brought the Roman imperial cult and British (Druidic) religion into direct conflict.

Omens and portents of disaster

In the meantime, the statue of Victory at Camulodunum fell down, for no apparent reason, and with its back turned as though it were fleeing the enemy. Frenzied women prophesied that destruction was at hand, that a clamour of foreign voices had been heard in their Senate house, the theatre had resounded with wailing, and in the Thames estuary an apparition of the colony in ruins had been seen.

What is more, the sea took on a bloody appearance, and shapes like human corpses left by the receding tide were interpreted as signs of hope by the Britons and with alarm by the veterans.

(TACITUS, *ANNALS*, 14. 32)¹⁹

Both Tacitus and Dio Cassius record ominous 'spiritual' happenings in the Roman urban centres that were such a focus for Boudica's wrath. Dio's testimony is virtually identical to that of Tacitus,²⁰ and it is more than likely that he had access to Tacitus's work. So, we need here to concentrate on the narrative of the earlier author who, because of his father-in-law Agricola's military service in Britannia, possessed both interest and knowledge about the province and the course of its absorption into the Roman Empire. Some modern scholars argue that Tacitus 'paid great attention to

omens'.²¹ However, it is necessary to interpret Tacitus as a multifaceted writer and, in seeking to understand his reportage of historical events, to take into account two things: his sceptical approach to certain 'events' and his deep unease about the conduct of emperors and politicians at Rome. So, what was Tacitus's motive in recording these frightening anti-Roman portents at Colchester? Elsewhere in literary treatment of high-profile Britons, such as the freedom-fighter Caratacus, and Boudica herself, it is clear that Tacitus disapproved of the highhandedness of the Roman army and its imperial backing during the early years of the Roman occupation in Britain. He presents his disquiet in the form of *oratio obliqua* (reported speech), a literary device much used in Roman antiquity. So he puts into the mouth of high-ranking 'barbarians' his own expressions of discomfort at the manner in which foreigners were oppressed and provinces acquired in the mid to late first century AD.²²

Omens and portents played an important role in Roman antiquity.²³ Serious attention was often paid to strange phenomena, such as lightning strikes, volcanic eruptions or other peculiar occurrences, in addition to the regular 'reading' of the entrails of sacrificed animals by professional *haruspices* ('gut gazers') and augury (the examination of bird-flight patterns). But sometimes omens were cynically manipulated for propaganda purposes, particularly those presenting themselves in dreams. For example, 'the emperor Augustus is said to have received many *omina imperii* (imperial omens) during his lifetime'.²⁴ The interpretation of dreams played a key role in healing cults throughout the Classical world; curative sanctuaries often contained a dormitory (*abatón*) for sick pilgrims whose dreams were recounted to presiding priests, who would use their accounts to predict their patients' medical outcomes.²⁵ Direct archaeological evidence for the presence of dream interpreters is present in the late Romano-British healing temple at Lydney in the Forest of Dean, whose *cella* (inner sanctum) was once adorned with a polychrome (multicoloured) mosaic floor. Its (rare) inscription tells us that the tessellated floor was commissioned by one Titus Flavius Senilis, a *praepositus religionum* (superintendent of religious rites) (see Figure 40). The inscription also provides the information that Senilis' clerk of works was a man called Victorinus, an *interpretes* (that is an interpreter of dreams).

There was an *abatón* or sleeping house here, and it is possible to imagine how Victorinus engaged with the pilgrims, explaining their dreams to them and to other religious practitioners who presided over this prestigious temple.²⁶ Although it is perhaps unlikely that Druids were involved here, the temple was dedicated to a British healer-god, Nodens.



FIGURE 40 Lost polychrome mosaic pavement from the *cella* of the fourth century AD temple to Nodens, Lydney. © Lydney Park Trust.

So, what should we make of Tacitus's description of the chilling portents that occurred at Camulodunum (Colchester) just as Boudica and her army were about to wreak havoc here, in London and at Verulamium? His testimony is full of drama and he places his audience right in the middle of the menace brooding over the Roman settlers in the veterans' colony. Tacitus uses the same trope or theme that permeated his narrative of the reception committee awaiting Suetonius Paulinus's army when the governor led the assault on Anglesey: that of female fury. Just as his soldiers faced screaming black-clad women, their hair awry, on the shores of the sacred Druid-inhabited island, so the settlers at Camulodunum were subjected to the prophecies of 'frenzied women', maddened creatures similar to the wine-intoxicated Maenads of Greek mythology, who tore men limb from limb when gripped by the power of Dionysus (Roman, Bacchus). Not only that, but the statue of the goddess Victory was seen to turn away from the veteran families, as though abandoning the Romans to their gruesome fate at the hands of another woman, Boudica. The foreign voices heard gabbling loudly in the council chamber and lamenting in the theatre would have added to the mounting fear, particularly as the acoustics of the theatre, at least, would have amplified the wails, making it seem as though it was full of doom-laden cries. And Tacitus puts the icing on the cake with his interpretation – of what was probably an innocent sunset reflecting from the water – as the river Thames full of blood and bodies. Was this Tacitean passage a purely literary device or was it based on genuinely

believed omens? If it was the latter, it seems plausible to see the Druids at work here, whipping up terror in spreading the rumours of these portents and, perhaps, actively involved in pushing over the statue of Victory and staging the horrible sounds in the Roman settlers' Senate and theatre.

Sacrificial revenge

Those who were taken prisoner by the Britons underwent every possible outrage; the most atrocious and bestial committed was this: they hung up naked the noblest and most beautiful women, cut off their breasts and sewed them to their mouths so that they seemed to be eating them. Then they impaled them on sharp stakes which ran the length of their bodies. All this they did to the accompaniment of sacrifices, feasting and orgies in their various sacred places, but especially in the grove of Andarte [Andraste]. This is the name they gave to Victory, and they regarded her with particular reverence.

(DIO CASSIUS, *ROMAN HISTORY*, 62. 7)²⁷

If the events described by Dio Cassius actually took place, they can be perceived as horrifically savage acts of revenge, ratified by the cloak of religious intent. Although not specifically stated, it is generally assumed that the sacred grove of Andraste was in London, but it could just as easily have been Camulodunum. This is an important passage, whether or not Dio fabricated all or most of the event that it purports to record. There is a lot in it to unpack, but the salient issues concern extreme 'overkill' that chimes with the brutal 'triple killing' of Lindow Man and the choice of women as sacrificial victims, perpetrated by a woman as sacred gifts to a female deity.

The excavation of a Gallo-Roman cemetery at Larzac, in southern France, during August 1983 revealed something rather unusual. One of the tombs, dating to around the end of the first century AD,²⁸ contained a cremation urn, inscribed with the name Gemma, over which was placed an inscribed lead tablet, written in the Gaulish language, that had been deliberately broken into two pieces.²⁹ This is a curse tablet (a *defixio*) designed to cast a doom-laden spell upon its victim (see Figure 41).

Gemma was not the curser's intended recipient, for the inscription lists those cursed by name. The tablet is a *duscelinata*, a poem or song of malediction, its alliterations and rhythms suggesting that it was meant to

soldiers and that of the noble Roman women, ‘raped’ with impaling-stakes and brutalized further by the ultimate taboo of symbolic cannibalism. Other valid comparisons between the Larzac *ducelinata* and the scene at Andraste’s grove include the names of the goddesses: ‘Victory’ and ‘Vengeance’. And, of course, it is easy to see connections between Boudica and Severa Tertionigna, one a female leader with divinatory powers, the other identified as a seeress.

Aftermath

Many Britons were cut down in the [final] battle . . . Many too were taken alive. Some, however, escaped and made preparations to fight again, but when in the meantime Boudica fell ill and died the Britons mourned her deeply and gave her a lavish funeral, and then they disbanded in the belief that now they really were defeated.
(DIO CASSIUS, *ROMAN HISTORY*, 62. 12)³²

No archaeological signs of a ‘lavish funeral’, that might have been Boudica’s, have been identified. It is curious that the Romans allowed such an event because of the fear that its location might have acted as a place of pilgrimage to a British ‘martyr’. Indeed, there is sound evidence that the Roman army did practise a kind of *damnatio memoriae* (erasure of bad memory)³³ in Icenian territory. In the 50s AD, an immense timber structure was erected from massive oak trunks at Fison Way, Thetford, and used for tribal assemblies. Forty-seven cloak-brooches were found at the site, presumably the result of accidental loss but proving the presence of gathered groups. Coins were minted here too, and finds of Roman military equipment suggest that they may have been brought here by Icenian warriors, as trophies of victory after successful skirmishes with Roman forces. It has even been suggested that it was here that the Icenii and Trinovantes made the decision to follow Boudica into full-scale rebellion. But at the time of or just before the rebellion erupted, a contingent of Paulinus’s forces systematically deconstructed the monument, not by fire but by careful dismantling, in order to leave no sign of its presence.³⁴ So, even if Boudica were to have received a ‘lavish funeral’, the Romans may not have permitted a permanent and visible marker in the East Anglian landscape (or wherever else the remains of the warrior queen may have been interred). But the event itself may have included a funeral pyre,

the deposition of grave goods and perhaps a funerary feast, somewhat in the manner of the nobleman buried with great ceremony at Folly Lane, Verlamion (later called Verulamium) in the 50s AD.³⁵ However Boudica's body might have been interred, I wonder whether her sacred hare was buried with her to accompany her to the afterlife.

Notes

- ¹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 62. 6; trans. S. Ireland, *Roman Britain: A Sourcebook*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 66.
- ² Filmed by Blink Films of London. The film shoot took place at Mill Hill Farm, in north London.
- ³ For detailed study of the Boudican Rebellion, see Richard Hingley and Christina Unwin, *Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Boudica Britannia* (London: Pearson Longman, 2006).
- ⁴ Tacitus, *Annals*, 12. 31.
- ⁵ *Annals*, 14. 30.
- ⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, 16. 95; trans. H. Rackham, *Pliny: Natural History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1945), pp. 549–51.
- ⁷ The chronology is based on radiocarbon dating: R. L. Otlet, A. J. Walker and S. M. Dadson, 'Report on Radiocarbon Dating of the Lindow Man by AERE, Harwell', in I. M. Stead, J. B. Bourke and D. Brothwell, *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog* (London: British Museum Publications 1986), pp. 27–30; J. A. J. Gowlett, R. Gillespie, E. T. Hall and R. E. M. Hedges, 'Accelerator Radiocarbon Dating on Ancient Human Remains from Lindow Moss', in *Lindow Man*, pp. 22–4.
- ⁸ R. G. Scaife, 'Pollen in Human Palaeofaeces; and a Preliminary Investigation of the Stomach and Gut Contents of Lindow Man', in *Lindow Man*, pp. 126–35, especially pp. 131–3.
- ⁹ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 5. 6; trans. Anne Wiseman and Peter Wiseman, *Julius Caesar: The Battle for Gaul* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 90.
- ¹⁰ *De Bello Gallico*, 1. 16–20.
- ¹¹ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 1. 90.
- ¹² Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman: Voyages of the Soul, Trance, Ecstasy and Healing from Siberia to the Amazon* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 67–9.
- ¹³ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 18.
- ¹⁴ Observation made in the early 2000s indicate that the sparring hares are frequently females fending off ardent males during the spring-time mating season. Perhaps one might see an analogy between Boudica as a belligerent female in combat with the masculinity of Paulinus and the Roman army. R. Page, 'The mad March world of the real Easter Bunny', *Daily Mail*, 25 March 2005, 15; Jill Mason, *The Hare* (London: Unwin, 2005).
- ¹⁵ *De Bello Gallico*, 5. 12.
- ¹⁶ M. Bridge, 'Chickens were once too divine to eat', *The Times*, Friday 10 April 2020, 3.
- ¹⁷ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14. 32; trans. Ireland, *Roman Britain: A Sourcebook*, p. 60.

- ¹⁸ I first raised this possibility in my *Sacred Britannia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 44.
- ¹⁹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14. 32; trans. Ireland, *Roman Britain: A Sourcebook*, p. 60.
- ²⁰ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 62. 1
- ²¹ G. Morgan, 'Omens in Tacitus' *Histories* I–III', in R. L. Wildfang and J. Isager (eds), *Divination and Portents in the Roman World* (Odense: Odense University Press, 2000), p. 38.
- ²² See, for example, Tacitus's treatment of Caratacus after he was captured by Claudius's forces for whipping up sedition among the Silures of South Wales: Tacitus, *Annals*, 12, 36–7, and the sympathetic voice he employed in describing what happened to Boudica and her daughters when Icenian assets were seized: *Annals*, 14. 31.
- ²³ John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (London: Thames & Hudson 1970), pp. 155–6.
- ²⁴ Robin Lorsch Wildfang, 'The Propaganda of Omens: Six dreams involving Augustus', in R. L. Wildfang and J. Isager (eds), *Divination and Portents in the Roman World* (Odense: Odense University Press, 2000), pp. 43–55.
- ²⁵ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 115.
- ²⁶ R. E. Mortimer Wheeler and Tessa V. Wheeler, *Report on the Excavation of the Prehistoric, Roman and Post-Roman Site in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press (for the Society of Antiquaries), 1932), pp. 102, 49–52–59; pl. XIXa. There was a bath-building where pilgrims could immerse themselves to cleanse them from infection and might drink the curative, ferruginous water, fed by the mineral-rich stream that flowed through the site.
- ²⁷ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 62. 7; trans. Ireland, *Roman Britain: A Sourcebook*, p. 67.
- ²⁸ Dated by the items found in the tomb alongside Gemma's cremation urn.
- ²⁹ Bernard Mees, *Celtic Curses* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009), pp. 52–69.
- ³⁰ There is an analogy between Severa Tertioncna's 'dual-nationality' name and that of the magician-priest, Gaius Verius Sedatus who presided over the underground shrine at Chartres (see elsewhere, this volume).
- ³¹ Notably in the grammar and spelling: Mees, *Celtic Curses*, p. 57.
- ³² *Roman History*, 62. 12.
- ³³ The most prominent examples of *damnatio memoriae* included the destruction of images and inscriptions associated with unpopular Roman emperors, such as Caligula.
- ³⁴ Paul Sealey, *The Boudican Revolt against Rome* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1997), p. 12; J. Davies, 'Patterns, Power and Political Progress in Iron Age Norfolk', in J. Davies and T. Williamson (eds), *Land of the Iceni: The Iron Age in Northern East Anglia* (Norwich: Centre of East Anglian Studies, University of East Anglia, 1999), 16; Tony Gregory, *Excavations at Thetford, 1980–82, Fison Way* (Norwich: East Anglian Archaeological Report 53, 1992); Richard Hingley and Christina Unwin, *Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005), pp. 33–6.
- ³⁵ Rosalind Niblett, *The Excavation of a Ceremonial Site at Folly Lane, Verulamium* (London: *Britannia Monograph Series* 14, 1999), frontispiece and *passim*.

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Chapter Seven

FROM RUNES TO SPOONS: DIVINING THE DIVINE

In particular when enquiring into matters of great import the Druids have a strange and terrible custom; they devote to death a human being and stab him with a dagger in the region above the diaphragm, and when he has fallen they foretell the future from his fall and from the convulsions of his limbs and, moreover, from the spurting of the blood, placing their trust in some ancient and long-continued observation of these practices.

(DIODORUS SICULUS, *LIBRARY OF HISTORY*, 5. 31)¹

The issues concerning the validity of Classical texts on the Druids have been addressed in earlier chapters. So Diodorus's description of divinatory sacrifice has to come under scrutiny for evaluation of its veracity in terms of accurate reporting via those who purported to have witnessed such events first hand. In Greek and Roman animal sacrifice, emphasis was given to the condition of the innards, particularly the liver and intestines. Here, the stress is upon the death throes of the hapless victim. Is there any archaeological evidence to back up Diodorus's testimony? Well, not directly, of course, but what about Lindow Man? Diodorus was chronicling an event that was pure theatre. And the 'triple killing' of the first Lindow bog man testifies to just such a protracted drama: stunning, throat-slitting and garrotting. The blows to the head might have caused Lindow Man to stumble before unconsciousness supervened; the blood from his neck would have spurting and frothed out from the wound, aided in its ejective force by the tightening of the ligature.²

Casting lots

For auspices and the casting of lots, the Germanic peoples have the highest regard. Their procedure in casting lots is uniform. They break off the branch of a fruit-tree and slice it into strips; they distinguish these by certain runes and throw them, as random chance will have it, onto a white cloth . . . then . . . after a prayer to the gods and an intent gaze heavenwards, the priest picks up three, one at a time, and reads their meanings from the runes scored on them.

If the lots forbid an enterprise, there can be no further consultations that day.

(TACITUS, *GERMANIA*, 10)³ (SEE FIGURE 42)



FIGURE 42 Reconstruction of the lot-casting rite among the Germans recorded by Tacitus in his *Germania*. © Anne Leaver.

In 1975, while working as assistant curator at Peterborough Museum, I came across an unpublished piece in the Romano-British collections that both interested and puzzled me. In the museum's archaeology register, it is described as a 'bronze object of unknown use'. It was found in the sediment of the river Nene near Milton Ferry, and was donated to the museum in 1935.⁴ The object consists of a long shank with a flat, ovoid or paddle-shaped terminal at one end, pierced with two holes at the shaft-end of the 'paddle'. The Milton Ferry implement has parallels elsewhere in Roman Britain, notably the three smaller and rougher iron examples from Moorgate Street, London.⁵ These objects are probably *sistra*, 'rattles' used in religious ceremonies, particularly in ancient Egypt but also at temples in Roman Gaul and Britain. The three London *sistra* all have rings threaded through the holes in the 'paddles' and these were almost certainly attached to small bells, to be shaken during processions. The holes in the Peterborough *sistrum* must also once have had rings and bells suspended from them. Its deposition in river water may have been a sacred act (see Chapter Three, this volume). However, for the present discussion, the real interest in this piece lies in the shaft itself, for close scrutiny reveals the presence of horizontal and slanting lines placed in groups along the vertical axes (see Figure 43). These are unlikely to have been decorative and their purpose may have been 'runic', using characters essentially similar in structure to early medieval ogham⁶ script and, perhaps in order to convey messages in arcane language that only religious functionaries could understand. If the 'writing' on the shaft of the Milton Ferry *sistrum* has been correctly identified, then it has sharp resonance with the runes carved on the wooden sticks used by Germanic priests, recorded by Tacitus (in the above quoted passage).

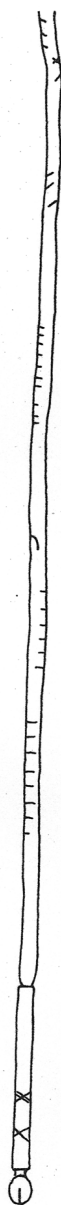


FIGURE 43 The shank of the Romano-British sceptre or *sistrum* (ceremonial rattle) from Milton Ferry, Peterborough showing the 'runic' lines. © Author.

Death of a ‘diviner-doctor’

Some seven years after the Claudian invasion, a man of high status died at the Trinovantes’ tribal capital of Camulodunum (Colchester) and his cremated remains buried with rich and singular grave furnishings. The élite cemetery in which the tomb was found was discovered and excavated by rescue archaeologists from the Colchester Archaeological Trust at Stanway, just outside the town during the late 1980s and mid-1990s. The site had been threatened by the advance of a quarry, which reached the burial enclosures in 1987.⁷ The tomb has been called the ‘doctor’s grave’ because of the presence of a medical kit, including surgical equipment positioned across a gaming board (see Figure 44).

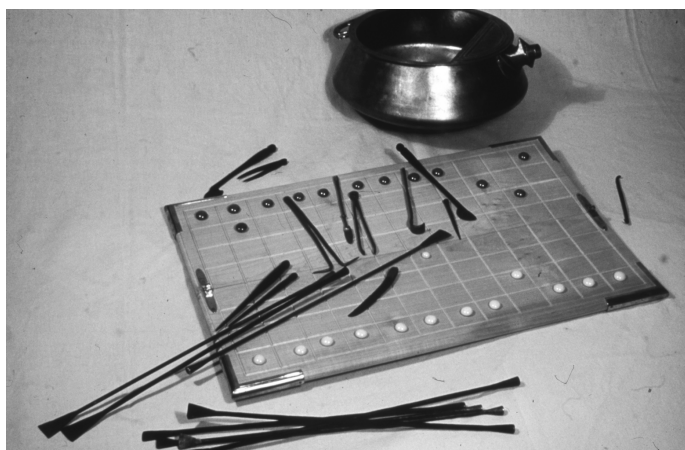


FIGURE 44 Replica of the tomb furniture, featuring the spouted bowl, gaming board, rods and medical instruments, from Stanway, Colchester, c. AD 50. © Colchester Archaeological Trust, by permission of Philip Crummy.

But there was more to this man’s profession than his role as a physician, for there are two pieces of evidence that suggests that he may have been some kind of shaman or diviner. The first consists of eight metal rods that had been placed on or around a gaming board (of which more later). Four of these spatula-ended rods were of iron, four of brass; they were also divided by size: two larger and two smaller of each metal.⁸ Their function as tools or implements defies explanation but might it be that these curious objects were designed as divining rods? If so, their differential sizes and metal

types might have possessed magical significance. Perhaps they were – like the Germanic ones recorded by Tacitus – thrown down and the pattern of their fall interpreted by professional clergy. But these rods may have had additional (or alternative) functions: one end of each is spatulate, leading to conjecture that they might have had practical, medicinal uses too.

Taken alone, such a divinatory interpretation for the bundles of rods might seem a flight of fancy, but the second piece of relevant evidence does reinforce the suggestion of a priestly, even shamanic connection. This is a copper-alloy bowl, in whose strainer spout there remained a plug of plant material which pollen analysis revealed to contain a large proportion of *Artemisia*.⁹ In all likelihood the bowl was used to infuse herbs for medicinal drinks, but it is also possible that the vessel could have served as an incense burner, producing fumes that acted as intoxicants or even as hallucinogens.¹⁰ Of course, the strainer bowl might have been put into the grave as part of a medicinal toolkit, but the bundles of rods deliberately scattered over the gaming board are more difficult to explain away as purely practical objects. Healing and shamanism are closely linked in many traditional societies.¹¹ And there is evidence from Romano-British and Gallo-Roman temples that doctors and priests practised, and may indeed often have been one and the same. For instance, eye doctors practised at the great temple to Sulis Minerva at Bath and at several important Gallic healing shrines, where physicians left behind pottery *collyrium* stamps, used to mark sticks of eye ointment.¹² And reference has been made, in Chapter Six, to the *abatón*, the dormitory attached to curative sanctuaries such as Lydney in the Forest of Dean for pilgrims to sleep and receive a visitation from the presiding deity.

The presence of gaming equipment in rich graves is not unique to the ‘doctor’. Another tomb at Stanway, known as the ‘Warrior’s burial,’ was also furnished with a board and counters. But it is possible that the positioning of the pieces on the board in the ‘doctor’s grave’ has significance, for the twenty-six blue and white counters are set onto the board as though in mid-play.¹³ What is more, one of the blue counters had been (almost certainly) deliberately placed upside down. The putative significance of the counter positions lies in the possibility that the deceased owner had been someone with a link not only to the material world but also to the spiritual dimension. The two ‘ghost players’ might represent the ‘doctor’ in his dual persona as healer and shamanic messenger between worlds. And this also fits with the inverted counter. The Sámi (of Lapland) had an old traditional belief that the souls of the dead walked upside down in the footsteps of the living and that the inversion of natural things represented links with

the otherworld.¹⁴ A good example of this line of thought is illustrated in trees, whose branches in the upper air are mimicked by their root systems spreading deep underground. The grouping of the rods, the strainer bowl, the medical instruments and much other grave paraphernalia on or around the gaming board¹⁵ may be significant, almost as though the very board itself were perceived as a kind of portal to the next world.

So, who was the Stanway doctor? His death in about AD 50 and the objects from the grave speak of a mingled cultural context that was both British and Roman, but his identity as a high-ranking Briton seems the more likely. His mixed cultural affiliations are perhaps revealed by the surgical toolkit buried with him. For although most of the instruments betray Roman manufacture, some had been 'tweaked' in order to cater for a more localized or individual medicinal practice, at a time when the Roman province of Britannia was newly born. Like the man who died at about the same time and buried with great ceremony at Folly Lane, Verulamium (see Chapter Six), the Stanway 'doctor' appears to have been a local man whose status may have been earned by birth or by his profession but, perhaps, even more so by his identity as someone who might have had the ear of the otherworld spirits.

Power and prison: Veleda the Batavian prophetess

The legionary commander Munius Lupercus was sent along with other presents to Veleda, an unmarried woman who enjoyed wide influence over the tribe of the Bructeri. The Germans traditionally regard many of the female sex as prophetic, and indeed, by an excess of superstition, as divine. This was a case in point. Veleda's prestige stood high, for she had foretold the German successes and the extermination of the legions. But Lupercus was put to death before he reached her.

Any personal approach to Veleda or speech with her was forbidden. This refusal to permit the envoys to see her was intended to enhance the aura of veneration that surrounded the prophetess. She was immured in a high tower, one of her relatives being deputed to transmit questions and answers as if he were mediating between a god and his worshippers.

(TACITUS, *THE HISTORIES*, 4. 61, 65)¹⁶

In the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris there is a stone statue of Veleda, by a nineteenth-century sculptor named Etienne-Hippolyte Maindron, who presented his work to the Salon in 1839. It depicts the ancient German prophetess as a young girl, her chin resting in her left hand, while leaning her right side against a tree. She is naked from the waist up and wears only a short pleated-skirt to reveal plump thighs and legs crossed at the ankle. Her hair is in long tresses and she appears to be wearing some kind of bonnet that frames her pensive face.¹⁷

In his book *The Augustan Aristocracy*, the ancient historian Ronald Syme remarked that ‘women have their uses for historians’.¹⁸ Was this the case with Tacitus’s description of Veleda? And was Maindron’s sculpture of an idealized ancient priestess any less ‘real’ than her treatment at the hands of a Roman historian? The answer is ‘probably’. Many statues of ancient Gallo-German ‘heroes’ were erected in the nineteenth century, at least partly in glorification of the past. So life-size stone and bronze images of the Gallic hero Vercingetorix (who fought so hard to free Gaul from Caesar in the 50s BC), can be seen at Alésia and Clermont Ferrand and of Arminius (Hermann) (who annihilated the Roman General Varus’s legions in AD 9, near Detmold in the German Teutoberg Forest).¹⁹

We need to put the quotations (above) from Tacitus’s *Histories* briefly into historical context: the rebellion of the Germanic (Batavian) nobleman Julius Civilis (whom we first met in Chapter Two), during the infamous ‘year of the four emperors’, that saw a bloody tussle between rival generals for the purple following the death of Nero. Despite his Romanized name, Civilis was a seditious thorn in Rome’s side and had already caused trouble in tribal lands bordering the Rhine. Now he was trying to stir up rebellion among the citizens of the Roman city of Cologne. Veleda’s prophecy of Germanic success in throwing off the Roman yoke persuaded the inhabitants of Cologne to throw their lot in with Civilis.

It is probable that the bones of Tacitus’s story of Veleda (Figure 10) were based upon fact. There is no reason for the Roman writer to invent characters, but the influence given to a woman – rather like that credited to Boudica – would have served to emphasize and perhaps exaggerate the foreign ‘barbarism’ faced by the Rhine army during and immediately after the chaos of power-grabbing after Nero’s reign. Here was a world where women could manipulate politics at the highest level. And yet Tacitus’s narrative also exhibits the converse: the manipulation of a seemingly semi-divine female by her male relatives.

It is worthwhile considering the themes contained within Tacitus’s terse narrative and, most of all, to see whether Veleda’s story has resonance

with the broader issue of Druids and other Gallo-British religious functionaries, despite her identity as Germanic rather than Gallic. Of course, the resounding similarity between Veleda and Gallic Druids, as described by Caesar and his peers, is her role as a seer. Her sequestration in a tower is interesting, as is her apparently obscure speech, only relayed to the people via a translator (the two combining to present a kind of ‘Tower of Babel’ image).²⁰ The language used by Veleda was supposedly divine, inaccessible to humans except via an intermediary of her own family. But there is archaeological evidence for sacred towers, both in Gaul and Britannia.²¹ Towers can do two things: separate and control. They are tall, impressive statements in the landscape, forbidding and easily guarded, enabling far sight, with the capacity to shut people out and to shut certain people in. Veleda might have ingested hallucinogens, so that she saw visions, and her speech might have been slurred or incomprehensible, allowing her ‘keeper’ to exploit her confusion, control her utterances, translate (or mistranslate), manipulate or even invent her messages so as to bend the people to the will of Civilis or other powerful individuals. If we can believe Tacitus’s narrative, Veleda’s situation was highly ambiguous: she was venerated but kept a virtual prisoner. Her unmarried state would perhaps render her as gender free, gender neutral or as belonging to another, special gender, reserved for special, ‘edgy’ people who transgressed normal gender boundaries. So, she would, in theory at least, possess powers usually closed to women.²² Whether Veleda was a powerful person or a weak one, a vulnerable puppet in strong male hands, must remain unanswered.

Transcendent fumes

One of the most exciting finds from the great Iron Age city (*oppidum*) at Manching in Bavaria was a ‘cult tree’, dating from the third century BC. It consists of a wooden rod, covered in gold foil, from which hang gilded bronze leaves, each one approximately 5 centimetres long.²³ The object appears to be some kind of ceremonial or ritual stave and when carried or shaken, the leaves might jingle if shaken vigorously. Taken just at face value, this is an extraordinary object, far more elaborate than most Iron Age and Roman-period sceptres. But that is not all. The shape of the leaves identifies the plant depicted as a species of *convolvulus* (perhaps morning glory), the seeds of which can be processed for use as a hallucinogenic drug.²⁴ Might this ritual staff have been the badge of office of a shaman-priest who ingested or inhaled the toxin in order to achieve an out-of-body experience and so engage with the spirit world while in a state of trance? (see Figure 45).



FIGURE 45 Reconstruction of a shamanic drug-induced trance. © Anne Leaver.

This interpretation of the Manching ‘cult tree’ might seem far-fetched. However, there is evidence for the use of mind-altering drugs in European prehistory, as early as the Neolithic.²⁵ *Thuribula* (incense burners) are known from Gallo-Roman and Romano-British sanctuaries. Two clay incense burners were discovered during excavations of the shrine at Coventina’s Well at Carrawburgh in 1876. Both bear inscriptions, scratched onto the clay while it was still damp before firing, and each was dedicated to ‘Coventina Augusta’ by ‘Saturninus Gabinus’, one pot proclaiming its

manufacture by his own hands.²⁶ The finding of three inscribed ceramic incense burners from a second-century AD underground Gallo-Roman shrine at Chartres in north-central Gaul (see Figure 46), similar in form to those from Coventina's Well, reinforces their sacral importance, as the inscriptions provide details of the person using the *thuribula* and of the divine powers summoned up by the incense.²⁷

The sanctuary's presiding officer was one Gaius Verius Sedatus who, on the most complete *thuribulum*, described himself as the custodian of the spirits he conjured. There then follows an incantation, including the names of deities otherwise unknown, except for one name 'Dru'. Sedatus's



FIGURE 46 One of the *thuribula* (incense burners) from a Gallo-Roman subterranean shrine at Chartres. © Ian Dennis.

shrine contained other religious implements, including those more often associated with eastern magical practices, so he may have set himself up as part priest, part magician, who dabbled in esoteric rituals. Sedatus's triple name suggests that he was a Roman citizen and may have enjoyed high status at Chartres, the tribal capital of the Carnutes. But what of 'Dru'? We should recall Caesar's comment that the annual pan-Druid assembly was held in the territory of the Carnutes, perceived as the centre of all Gaul.²⁸ But why would the Druids be mentioned alongside spirits listed by name on the Gallo-Roman *thuribula* at Chartres, unless – in a peculiar reinvention of old free-Gallic Druidism – Sedatus changed their status from priest to god?

Playing the spoons

In Chapter Five, pairs of 'divining' spoons from Wales and beyond were considered. I want to pick up on these curious objects in a little more detail, particularly in the context of the Chartres *thuribula*. The inscriptions on each of the three extant incense burners from the Gallic subterranean shrine are headed with the cardinal points 'oriens', 'meridie', 'occidens' and 'septentrio' ('east', 'south', 'west' and 'north'). It may well be that four original *thuribula* were originally positioned at the four compass points. This is highly relevant to the spoons, from Castell Nadolig (Cardiganshire) (Figure 31), Crosby Ravensworth (Cumbria) and elsewhere in late Iron Age Britannia, for in each pair, the inner surface of one spoon was marked by two lines intersecting at right angles to form quadrants.²⁹ A few years ago, following initial studies by staff at the British Museum, the television presenter Neil Oliver and I conducted experiments with replica pairs of spoons to see how they might have been used in divining rituals. We put together various powders, including red ochre, bone-ash and dried blood, as well as oil, water and liquid blood and using a 'blow-pipe' made from a hollow bird-bone. Then, closing the spoons together, I blew each of the substances in turn through the perforation in the upper spoon so that the spatter landed on the concave, quadrant-marked surface of the lower one. The powders achieved a better scatter-pattern than the liquids. Might this distribution have been used in divination practices, much as Roman Augurs interpreted the flight patterns of flocks of birds and plotted them onto sacred ground beneath? There is no way of proving it, but it is at least a possibility that such spoons formed part of the toolkit used by ancient Druids or other professional prophets.

Masters of voice

Caesar visited the Carnutes, among whom the revolt had first begun . . . He found that they were particularly alarmed because they were very much aware of what they had done. Caesar wanted to free this tribe from its fear as soon as possible, and so he demanded that Gutuatrus, who had been an instigator of this revolt . . . should be handed over for punishment.

(CAESAR, *DE BELLO GALLICO*, 8. 38)³⁰

Although Caesar records ‘Gutuatrus’ as the name of a person, its meaning in Gaulish, ‘Father of Voice’ or ‘Father of Inspiration’, is more a title than a personal name. Of course, this Carnutian might have adopted such a name because of his skill as an orator but archaeological evidence suggests that such a title may have a religious connotation. The Chartres *thuribula* inscriptions contain lists of spirits to be summoned by Sedatus: all of the names begin with ‘plosives’, hard, acoustically projected alphabetic sounds, like ‘b’, ‘p’ or ‘d’, as though the list was meant to be chanted aloud. Voices were an important part of ancient ritual events, as we have seen with the Germanic prophetess Veleda. The alternative translation ‘Father of Inspiration’ is more telling still, in terms of prophetic acuity. And, of course, Caesar’s Gutuatrus was a member of the Carnutes, the tribe whose capital was at Chartres and where the annual Druidic Assembly took place, all contributing to the notion that this person was a Druid, shaman or other important Gallic religious functionary. And there is archaeological evidence for the close link between the Gutuater and religion during the Roman period. Three stone altars from eastern Gaul bear witness to this: a lost stone from Maçon, refers to a *gutuator* of the Roman god Mars who was also a priest of a local god Moltinus; and two from the Roman city of Autun, another *gutuator*, associated with a second local deity, Anvallis. All of these *gutuatri* are recorded on the inscriptions as having Gaulish names, including Norbaneius Thallus.³¹ The remit of a Father of Inspiration might well have included the interpretation of dreams; the late Roman temple of Lydney (first mentioned in Chapters One and Six) possessed such an official, Victorinus, whose role as an *interpretes* was recorded on the inscribed mosaic adorning the great temple of the British god Nodens at Lydney Park (Figure 40).

Coligny: a Druidic calendar?

In 1897, 150 pieces from an inscribed bronze sheet, along with a bronze statue (possibly of a god) were found buried in a field north of Coligny in central Gaul. When whole, the sheet would have been 150 centimetres long and 90 centimetres high, and it is clear that the metal was deliberately broken up before its purposeful interment.³² The long inscription is written in the Gaulish language and consists of a five-year calendar divided into months, fortnights and days, each month preceded by the abbreviations MAT or (AN(Mat)), meaning 'good/complete' and 'bad/unlucky/incomplete'³³ times for ritual activities such as sacrificial procedures. The seasons are listed, and the months are divided into fortnights by the word ATENOUX ('returning night'). The calendar is punched with holes for pegs to be inserted next to each day in order to enable calculations and cyclical revisions (see Figure 47). It appears that the most efficacious time for sacred practices was in the first fortnight, the time of the waxing moon.

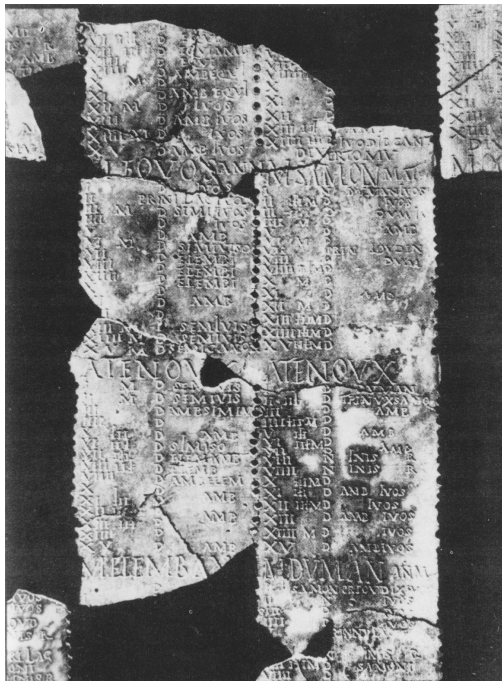


FIGURE 47 Part of the Gallo-Roman sacred calendar, from Coligny, France. © Author.

The calendar is deemed to date from the early Gallo-Roman period but may well have been copied from an earlier one. The detail of the calendar and its lunar referencing system tallies with what Julius Caesar wrote concerning the Gauls' preoccupation with the night-time and the Druids' astronomical learning.³⁴ The inscribed bronze sheet from Coligny displays a sophisticated means of calendrical computing, and it would be surprising if the Druids were not central to its construction and its implementation. Although it was produced sometime after the Druids' power base had diminished, and their freedom to act as priests had been curtailed, this extraordinary artefact demonstrates that their religious influence was far from being a spent force in Roman Gaul.

Notes

¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5.31, 3–4; trans. J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 (1959–60), 247–75, quotation is on p. 251.

² The Iron Age bog man from Grauballe in Denmark sustained a similar throat wound, although this one was so deep that it all but severed his head. Before his throat was slit, this sacrificial victim had ingested ergot poison, which would have caused him to stagger about, with a curious weaving motion. See, P. Asingh and N. Lynnerup (eds), *Grauballe Man: An Iron Age Bog Body Revisited* (Moesgaard: Moesgaard Museum/Jutland Archaeological Society, 2007); Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Bog Bodies Uncovered: Solving Europe's Ancient Mystery* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015a), pp. 115–20. So, in some ways this prolonged and complicated death ritual mirrors that of Lindow Man (and has similarities with Diodorus's description of Druidic divinatory sacrifice).

³ Tacitus, *Germania*, 10; trans. H. Mattingly, *Tacitus on Britain and Germany* (West Drayton: Penguin, 1948), pp. 108–9.

⁴ Miranda Green, *A Romano-British Ceremonial Bronze Object found near Peterborough* (Peterborough: Peterborough City Museum Monograph 1, 1975), p. 1.

⁵ London Museum, *London in Roman Times* (London: The London Museum: London Museum Catalogues 3, 1930), p. 108 and pl. 48.

⁶ Ogham or ogam script was used principally in early medieval Ireland but to a lesser extent in Wales, especially in the south-west: see, Miranda Aldhouse-Green and Ray Howell, *Celtic Wales*, 2nd edition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), pp. 109 and 120–3; M. Ó Murchú, 'The Irish Language: Part 1. Irish Language and Society', in G. Price (ed.), *The Celtic Connection* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992), pp. 31–2.

⁷ Philip Crummy, Stephen Benfield, Nina Crummy, Valery Rigby and Donald Shimmin, *Stanway: An Élite Burial Site at Camulodunum* (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, Britannia Monograph Series 24, 2007), p. 1.

⁸ Crummy *et al.*, *Stanway*, pp. 201–5.

- ⁹ Probably *Artemisia Vulgaris* (mugwort), possibly mixed with *Artemisia Absinthe* (wormwood): P. E. J. Wiltshire, 'Palynological Analysis of the Organic Material Lodged in the Spout of the Strainer Bowl', in Crummy *et al.*, *Stanway*, pp. 394–8.
- ¹⁰ There is evidence that Mexican mugwort (*Artemisia Mexicana*) was used in this way: Richard Evans Schultes, Albert Hofmann and Christian Rätsch, *Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred, Healing and Hallucinogenic Powers* (Rochester VT: Healing Arts Press, 1992), p. 98. Traditional herb medicine in the Scottish Highlands includes *Artemisia Vulgaris* (mugwort) and *Artemisia Absinthe* (wormwood), which could be made into drinks to cure stomach complaints or act as a vermifuge (to get rid of worm infestations) or smoked, perhaps to induce an altered state of consciousness: Mary Beith, *Healing Threads: Traditional Medicines of the Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1995), pp. 229 and 251.
- ¹¹ See Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman: Voyages of the Soul, Trance, Ecstasy and Healing from Siberia to the Amazon* (London: Macmillan, 1995).
- ¹² G. C. Boon, 'Potters, Oculists and Eye-Troubles', *Britannia*, 14 (1983), 1–12; Miranda Green, *Pilgrims in Stone: Stone Images from the Gallo-Roman Sanctuary of Fontes Sequanae* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series 754, 1999b), 85.
- ¹³ P. Crummy, 'The gaming board in CF47: the remains as found, possible reconstructions and post-depositional movements', in Crummy *et al.*, *Stanway*, pp. 352–9. As Crummy points out, it may well be that the counters shifted as a result of accidental movement while the board was placed in the grave or moved as the board slowly decayed.
- ¹⁴ Richard Bradley, *An Archaeology of Natural Places* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 12; Tim Ingold, *The Appropriation of Nature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 246.
- ¹⁵ Crummy *et al.*, *Stanway*, p. 203, fig. 98 for diagram showing the positioning of the most significant grave goods.
- ¹⁶ Tacitus, *The Histories*, 4. 61, 65; trans. Kenneth Wellesley, *Tacitus the Histories: A New Translation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 247 and 250.
- ¹⁷ C. Goudineau, 'La Redécouverte des Druides', in V. Guichard and F. Perrin (eds), *Les Druides* (Paris: *L'Archéologue*, Hors Série 2, 2000), pp. 58–64, special feature and photograph on p. 63.
- ¹⁸ Ronald Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), quoted in Ellen O'Gorman, *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 122.
- ¹⁹ Anthony King, *Roman Gaul and Germany* (London: British Museum Publications, 1990), pp. 49–52 and 61.
- ²⁰ The Tower of Babel was allegedly in the land of Shinar, Babylonia. Everyone in Shinar spoke one tongue until they built the tower, when God decided that the people here were in danger of becoming too powerful, and so deliberately confused their speech so that no group could understand the others: *Genesis* 11, vv. 1–9.

- ²¹ For example, at the late Iron Age and early Romano-British shrine at Hayling Island, Hampshire and the 'Tour de Vésone' at Périgueux in the Dordogne: R. Downey, A. King and G. Soffe, 'The Hayling Island Temple and religious connections across the channel', in W. Rodwell (ed.), *Temples, Churches and Religion in Roman Britain* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports 77(i), 1980), pp. 289–302; Michael J. T. Lewis, *Temples in Roman Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 31, and pl. 1b.
- ²² M. J. Green, 'Images in opposition: polarity, ambivalence and liminality in cult representation', *Antiquity*, 71 (1997), 898–911. The Roman Vestal Virgins had special status: they were allowed to conduct business in their own right, but if they were unchaste during their thirty-year term of office, they suffered the terrible penalty of being buried alive: Plutarch, *Life of Numa*, 9–10; John Ferguson, *Greek and Roman Religion: A Source Book* (Park Ridge NJ: Noyes Press, 1980), pp. 57–8.
- ²³ F. Perrin, 'Le Gui', in V. Guichard and Franck Perrin (eds), *Les Druides (L'Archéologue Hors Série 2, 2000)*, p. 22. For discussion of the great hoard of 487 gold Iron Age coins found in 1999 at Manching but originally imported from further east, in what is now the Czech Republic, see S. Sievers, 'Le Trésor de Manching', in V. Guichard and F. Perrin (eds), *Les Druides (L'Archéologue, Hors Série 2, 2000)*, p. 41.
- ²⁴ Paddy Coker, Environmental Geographer, University of Greenwich, pers. comm.
- ²⁵ A. Sherratt, 'Sacred and Profane Substances: the Ritual Use of Narcotics in Later Neolithic Europe', in P. Garwood, D. Jennings, R. Skeates and J. Toms (eds), *Sacred and Profane: Proceedings of a Conference on Archaeology, Ritual and Religion Oxford, 1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph 32, 1991), pp. 50–64. *The Times*, Friday 29 May 2020, published an article on research findings at an ancient Judaic shrine at the fortress of Tel Arad, discovered in the 1960s but now revealing the residue of tetrahydrocannabinol (also known as 'THC'), the principal psychoactive element in cannabis: Anon, 'How cannabis helped ancient Judah's priests pray to a higher power', (*The Times*, May 2020), 16.
- ²⁶ R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain: Volume 1, Inscriptions on Stone* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), nos 1530, 1531, p. 487, pl. XVIII; Lindsay Allason-Jones and Bruce McKay, *Coventina's Well: A Shrine on Hadrian's Wall* (Chesters: The Trustees of the Clayton Collection, Chesters Museum, 1985), nos 142 and 143, pp. 41–7.
- ²⁷ D. Joly, W. Van Andringa and S. Willerval, 'L'attirail d'un magicien rangé dans un cave de Chartres Autricum', *Gallia*, 67. 2 (2010), 125–208; M. J. Aldhouse-Green, 'The magician's house', in R. Haeussler and A. King (eds), *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications XX, 2017), pp. 325–38.
- ²⁸ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 13.
- ²⁹ A. Fitzpatrick, 'Les Druides en Grande-Bretagne', in V. Guichard and F. Perrin (eds), *Les Druides* (Paris: *L'Archéologue*, Hors Série 2, 2000), pp. 47–9; M. J.

Aldhouse-Green, 'Reading Runes, Telling Spoons: Priests, Ritual and Magic in Iron Age and Roman Britannia', in S. Alfayé Villa and F. Pina Polo (eds), *Dioses, Sacerdotes y Magosen el Mundo Antiguo, Bandue: Revista de la Sociedad Española de Ciencias de las Religiones XI* (Madrid) (2018–19), pp. 147–61. As mentioned in Chapter Four of this volume, Roman Augurs used *litui* to mark out quadrants in sacred space that they used to interpret the bird-flight patterns over them.

³⁰ *De Bello Gallico*, 8. 38.

³¹ T. D. Kendrick, *The Druids* (London: Methuen, 1927) pp. 135–6; G. Coulon, 'La survivance du Druidism à l'époque gallo-romaine', in V. Guichard and F. Perrin (eds), *Les Druides* (Paris: *L'Archéologue Hors Série* 2, 2000) pp. 52–5; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 52–3, fig. 16.

³² J. Lefort, 'Les Druides Astronomes. Le calendrier gaulois de Coligny', in V. Guichard and F. Perrin (eds), *les Druides* (Paris: *L'Archéologue Hors Série* 2, 2000), pp. 23–5; A. P. Fitzpatrick, 'Night and day: the symbolism of astral signs on later Iron Age anthropomorphic short swords', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 62 (1996), 273–98. M. J. Green, 'The Time Lords: Ritual Calendars, Druids and the Sacred Year', in A. Gibson and Derek Simpson (eds), *Prehistoric Ritual and Religion* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998a), pp. 190–202; Adolfo Zavaroni, *On the structure and terminology of the Gaulish Calendar* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series 1609, 2007).

³³ According to whether the month had thirty or twenty-nine days.

³⁴ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 15, 18.

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Chapter Eight

DRUIDS AND DEITIES: CHANGING SPIRITS IN ROMAN GAUL AND BRITAIN

[T]hose Gauls who propitiate with human sacrifices the merciless gods Teutas, Esus and Taranis – at whose altars the visitant shudders because they are as awe-inspiring as those of Scythian Diana . . . The Druids, too . . . resumed the barbarous rites of their wicked religion.

(LUCAN, *THE PHARSALIA*, 1)¹

Lucan's epic poem describes the Gaul that Caesar knew from his sojourn there as conqueror-commander in the 50s BC. The significance of the passage lies in the naming of pre-Roman deities in Gaul, the only Classical text that provides such information. And we know that Lucan did not simply invent these names since each one has an archaeological voice. Esus is mentioned and depicted, as a woodcutter (see Figure 8), on a sacred stone pillar dated to AD 26 in Paris.² Several inscribed dedications to Taranis are scattered over Western Europe and include one altar (see Figure 7) from the Roman legionary fortress of Chester.³ Likewise, Teutates is occasionally represented on inscriptions from Roman Britain.⁴

So, Lucan was not making up these gods, whom he associates with the Gallic Druids. They were present in the religious thinking before the arrival of the Roman *mores* that included epigraphy and iconography as widely used methods of referring to divine beings, and were given a voice through these new 'technologies of worship'.⁵ Later in this chapter further consideration will be given to the conundrum of how (and why) deities with indigenous Gallo-British names came to be incorporated into the Roman provincial pantheon, and what, if any, role the Druids may have played. But first, I want to revisit the hidden sanctuary at Chartres, whose incense burners were described in Chapter Seven.

Chartres and the Druids: from theocrats to gods?

Chartres (Autricum) was the tribal capital of the Carnutes and, under Roman rule, it became its main Gallo-Roman political centre. Its *ordo* (city council) would be made up of high-ranking Gallic men whose affiliation (at least publicly) was to Rome. The religious practitioner in charge of the underground sanctuary, that dates to the early second century AD,⁶ was Gaius Verius Sedatus, almost certainly a public official and a Roman citizen. But what was he doing performing clandestine rites out of the public eye? And why was the house – in whose cellar the shrine was situated – burnt down, thus unwittingly preserving the little sanctuary until its discovery in 2005? Was the fire accidental or a deliberate attack upon a subversive and discredited *magus*?⁷ All we know about this man's religious role is contained within the inscriptions on the *thuribula*. In the texts, he summons up the 'omnipotent spirits' and calls himself *vester custos* ('your guardian'). This is odd in itself for surely the spirits were deemed to be in charge, yet Sedatus appears to put himself in control, capable of summoning them at will rather than presenting himself as a suppliant hoping and praying for spiritual contact. And the list of divine beings conjured up by name is also interesting for all of the gods mentioned are otherwise archaeologically unrecorded, except for 'Dru'.

'Dru' is a Gaulish prefix or root word meaning either 'wise' or 'oak tree'. But it is, of course, also an abbreviation of 'Druid'.⁸ So what are we to make of this inclusion in the spirit-list? Perhaps all the names summoned by Sedatus (apart from 'Dru') were simply random, made-up words, proclaimed by the 'priest-in-charge', in order to impress and overawe the worshippers. Or was the term 'Dru' deliberately inserted into Sedatus's spirit-list as part of a reinvention of ancient Druidism? The latter might explain why the shrine was hidden away in a subterranean chamber. The disposition of the religious items in the underground space is also telling, for cult paraphernalia, including sacred vessels, was tucked away underneath the staircase leading down to the cellar, away from prying eyes, maybe just before the house was raided and set on fire. Could pro-Roman vigilantes, keen to eliminate seditious behaviour that harked back to independent Gaul when the Druids' power and influence was still a force to be reckoned with, have been responsible for the destruction of Sedatus's house? The shrine contained several objects whose use might have been frowned upon by *romanitas*, including ceramic vessels with snake-entwined handles and other material apparently associated with Graeco-Egyptian magical practices. And the incense burners themselves,

with their capacity to produce hallucinogenic fumes and shamanic-like trance states might also have been regarded as dangerously subversive. Sedatus might well have been a kind of 'double agent', a model Roman citizen who took his seat in the council chamber by day but by night, descending to his secret shrine with a few faithful followers, to command weird spirit forces in a defiant reinvention of *gallitas*, a nostalgic backward glance at the old independent Druidic Gaul.

Dark arts

Sometimes, human remains leave a clue as to the roles that their owners may have held in life. And occasionally, the treatment of the dead hints at something quite dark. In Roman Britain, during the third and fourth centuries AD, the bodies of certain elderly women were treated in a singular manner suggesting a desire symbolically to render them mute, as though they had posed a threat by their speech during life and were still feared after their deaths. Two specific groups of burials come to mind: clusters from around Kimmeridge in Dorset dating to the late third century AD and from the Lankhills cemetery in late Roman Winchester.⁹ The women's bodies at the latter site were decapitated and their heads carefully positioned by their legs. At Kimmeridge the rites were more bizarre still: they were not only beheaded, but their lower jaws were removed before the crania were placed at their feet. An outlying burial of a woman, whose head was also removed and placed by her lower body, has been recorded at Guilden Morden (Cambridgeshire).¹⁰ This woman's skeleton displayed signs of severe arthritis that would have crippled her and caused constant pain. This might be relevant to understanding how these women were regarded by their community and why their bodies received such curious ritual treatment after death. All the women were elderly and old age and infirmity might result in short tempers and sharp tongues, perhaps leading to fear of spells and witchcraft among those on the receiving end. Were these women harmless individuals made cantankerous by pain and loneliness or did they practise their special powers relating to spell-binding, cursing and communication with dark spiritual forces, powers which, when they died, were feared to continue unless their very corpses were silenced?

The 'wise women' buried with special, 'dumbing' rites in late Roman Britain surely had their ancestry in the Iron Age, where they might have been regarded with fear and reverence because of their spiritual powers. In the early fourth century BC, the body of a woman in her thirties or early forties was interred in a pit within an Iron Age enclosed settlement at

Great Houghton, Northamptonshire.¹¹ The wear imprinted on the woman's leg bones suggests that in life she had spent a great deal of time kneeling, in hard physical labour such as grinding corn; her teeth were in very poor condition too. But she was given no ordinary burial: this person was positioned face down and slightly on her right side, the arms folded beneath her, with the wrists crossed as though they were bound. Her legs were so tightly contracted that it seems as if they also were trussed up close to the torso. The most unusual feature, though, was the presence of a lead torc (necklet) placed round the neck back to front, so with its terminals not at the front beneath the chin – the normal position for such an ornament – but at the back of the neck (see Figure 48, a and b).

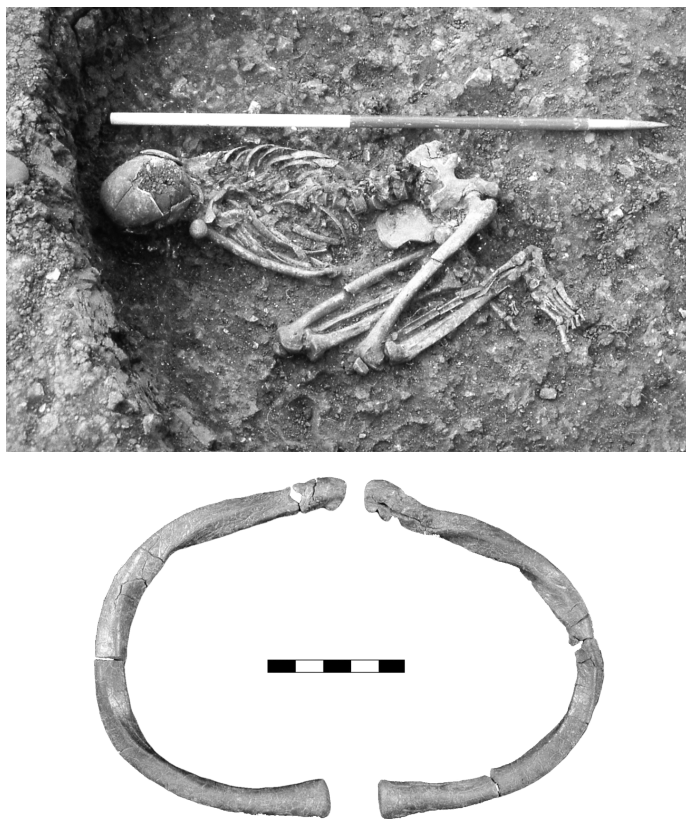


FIGURE 48 Skeleton of a woman wearing a lead torc back-to-front, from Great Houghton, Northamptonshire; fourth century BC.
© Northampton Archaeological Society. By permission of Andy Chapman.

Torcs are well known as high-status gold, silver or bronze neck ornaments in Iron Age Britain and Europe (see Chapter Four). But the choice of lead for this woman's neck ring is both singular and significant. Lead is a base metal and in late Iron Age and Roman Gaul and Britain, it was the metal of choice for curse tablets (*defixiones*), binding-spells written on lead sheets invoking the spirits to avenge the curser (see Chapter Six).¹² The reversed placement of the Great Houghton woman's torc, and the corpse's face-down position, also display otherness and, perhaps, pointed the way to the underworld where she belonged. And there is something else that set this woman apart from her community: a very rare genetic condition that affected her wrist bone and that would have reduced her dexterity.¹³ Was this a disability that marked her out as special, even touched by the spirits of the underworld?¹⁴ In many ways, the treatment of this Iron Age woman resonates strongly with that of those whose heads (and sometimes mandibles) were removed in late Roman Britain. Maybe these people dabbled in dark arts and invoked dark spirits, like the goddess Adsagsona of Larzac, who was conjured up by Severa Tertionicia at Larzac.¹⁵

Subversive images

They [the Germans] do not, however, deem it consistent with the divine majesty to imprison their gods within walls or represent them with anything like human features.
(TACITUS, *GERMANIA*, 9)¹⁶

In Chapter Four, the possible role of the Druids in the selection of imagery on Iron Age coins was considered. But what can be said of religious iconography in Roman Gaul and Britain? Sculptures provide abundant evidence for the wholesale representation of essentially Classical deities, such as Mars, Mercury and Minerva. But alongside these depictions are others that display divergence from naturalism and introduce elements of surrealism. Whilst the new technologies of worship brought into the newly absorbed provinces of Britannia and Gallia embraced *romanitas*, where sacred images followed the rubric of gods being perceived in the image of humans,¹⁷ so a resistance to the imposition of such blanket *humanitas* upon the gods can be identified. Two specific images, one each from Britain and Gaul, serve to illustrate this phenomenon. The first is from Corinium: a small limestone relief carving of a nude male figure, seated cross-legged, with stubs of antlers on his head and holding in each hand a large, sinuous

ram-headed serpent whose heads rear up to consume fruits from open baskets by the 'god's' ears (see Figure 49). His legs are replaced by the lower parts of the snakes' bodies.¹⁸



FIGURE 49 Stone image of a male wearing antlers, his legs merged with the bodies of two ram-headed serpents, from Roman Corinium. © Corinium Museum.

This image is by no means unique to Corinium; as we saw in Chapter Four, a similarly antlered head is depicted on a British silver coin. And his image appears on sculptures from several Gallo-Roman sites, including Rheims, where he sits cross-legged on a throne, flanked by the Roman deities Mercury and Apollo. And on a stone pillar from Paris, the same monument where the Gallic god Esus is invoked (see above, this chapter), an antlered god is named 'Cernunnos' (the 'Horned One').¹⁹ The name is written in Gaulish and the image itself has no connection with Rome but is entirely of Gallo-British origin. On the Rheims stele, he is centre stage; his Roman companions are depicted as acolytes, standing beside him and the sculptor treated their figures as less substantial than the antlered one.

To me, the Corinium image (together with its comparanda) sends a message of delicate but penetrative manipulation of the Roman 'iconographic habit', deliberately veering away from naturalism by blurring

the boundaries between human and animal forms. Shape-shifting is a well-documented shamanistic device, in terms of presentation. In many societies, from deep past to present, shamans within particular traditions have dressed up in animal costumes in order to 'assume' a skin-turning persona that facilitated contact with the spirit world.²⁰ The sculpture from Corinium exhibits double, or even triple, shape-changing traits: the mix of human with stag form; the ram heads on serpents and the swapping of human legs for snake bodies. And the whole sculpture employs *romanitas* solely in the use of stone figural expression to display a vigorous counterpoint, perhaps subversive in its message of Britishness.

The second carving to explore is from the Gallo-Roman settlement of Bolards (Côte d'Or), a frontier town on the edges of three tribal territories (those of the Aedui, the Lingones and the Sequani), notable for its great thermal healing sanctuary. The 'edgy' positioning of the shrine itself is interesting, perhaps implying the presence of a 'no man's land', free from land disputes. Inside the temple, the excavators discovered a stone carving of three anthropomorphic figures. One is a seated woman dressed in the long flowing gown of a Roman matron, holding a *patera* (offering plate) and a *cornucopiae* (horn of plenty), both common attributes of a Roman goddess. The central figure is more interesting: it is a hermaphroditic image, with long hair, fully developed breasts and male genitalia; its mural crown (in the form of a turret) signifies its identity as a territorial guardian (which belies the temple's position at a tribal border). The third image is highly indicative of shape-shifting: it is of a bearded man, triple-faced and wearing antlers.²¹ My view is that the meaning of these three images is multifaceted: it could be that the 'Roman' woman represents the *romanitas* of the settlement; the central bi-sexual figure perhaps depicts the protector of the town and its sacred place, and maybe also displays the feminine (Roman?) and masculine (Gaulish?) identities of Bolards; and it is possible that the third figure illustrates the deeper significance of the shrine in its boundary setting, a display of a shamanic shape-shifter, able to make soul-journeys between two worlds: Roman and native, as well as the more theological borders between the material and spirit worlds. And the three faces may reflect the three tribes on whose boundaries the temple was built.

As discussed above, it should not be assumed that the antlered images from Corinium and Bolards represent deities. They could, with as much validity, be interpreted as people dressed up as stags, shamanic beings donning the persona of 'animal helpers', as happens so in many traditional shamanistic communities.²² The images from Corinium and Bolards

share the skin-turning attributes of antlers. Both may represent shamans, donning stags' antlers in order to aid their boundary-crossing personae. Some evidence from late Iron Age and Roman Britain supports the presence of shamans. It has long been recognized that the only wild species represented, in any numbers, in the ritual pit deposits of animals at Iron Age hillforts such as Danebury and Winklebury, are ravens. Until recently, it was thought that they were present because of their possible association with the underworld.²³ But recent research has led to suggestions that ravens had far more significance than this.²⁴ These birds are particularly tolerant of humans and they have a distinctive 'voice' that can sound like human speech. Some of the raven corpses from Danebury indicated that the birds were old when they died.²⁵ Might they have been tame birds, perhaps even revered? But the most startling thing about these corvid deposits is that cut marks on many of the wing bones indicate that wings and feathers were sometimes deliberately cut off after death. A feasible reason for such acts is that these body parts were utilized by people, and one powerful motive was their use for headdresses, perhaps worn by Druid-shamans in contacting the spirit world. The renown of ravens for their prophetic powers in, for example, early Irish and Norse mythology,²⁶ may also have been behind the use of raven feathers by priests, as cloaks or headgear, because it was believed that these powers could thereby be bestowed upon the wearer in ritual events.

The images discussed above may be interpreted as a deliberate counterpoint to the veristic (true to life) iconography that characterized the sacred imagery of Roman tradition. Religion can be a powerful, if often quiet, force for challenge, and the manner in which surrealism – as exemplified by blurring gender and species – might usefully be seen as ways of manipulating the new order, and those responsible for such imagery were likely to be in the forefront of Gallo-British self-identification in a Roman provincial setting. Whether the images from Corinium and Bolards, and their fellows, were those of deities or shamans, their presence indicates the maintenance, indeed florescence, of indigenous sacred traditions alongside those of the incomers from the Roman world.

Syncretism or something else: coupling divinities

Peregrinus, son of Secundus, a Treveran, to Loucetius Mars
and Nemetona willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow.

(COLLINGWOOD AND WRIGHT, 1965, NO. 140)²⁷

To the goddess Sulis for the welfare and safety of Aufidius
Maximus of the Sixth Legion Victrix, Marcus Aufidius Lemnus,
his freedman, willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow.
(COLLINGWOOD AND WRIGHT, 1965, NO. 144)²⁸

To the goddess Sulis Minerva and the Deities of the (two)
emperors Gaius Curiatius Saturninus, centurion of the
Second Legion Augusta, willingly and deservedly fulfilled his
vow for himself and his kindred.
(COLLINGWOOD AND WRIGHT, 1965, NO. 146)²⁹

Throughout Roman Britain and Gaul, people set up votive inscriptions to deities that seem to straddle the divide between Roman and indigenous divine identities. Given that virtually no pre-Roman epigraphy appears to have existed, what should we make of the Gallo-British god names present on these dedications? Peregrinus's altar (see Figure 50) is atypical for

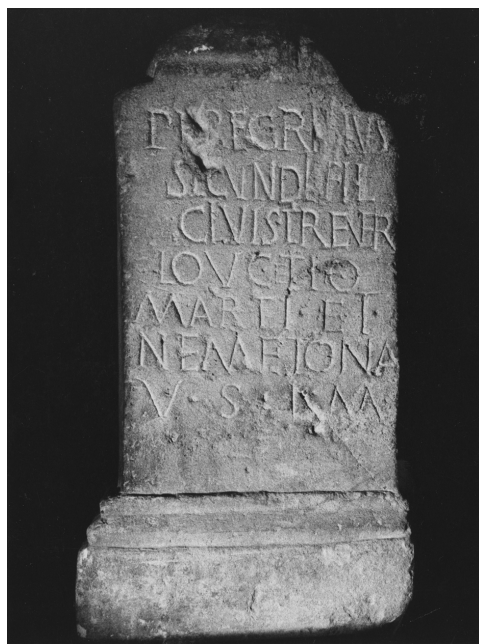


FIGURE 50 Altar dedicated to Loucetius Mars and Nemetona, by a Treveran called Peregrinus, from the temple to Sulis Minerva at Bath. © Author. By permission of the Roman Baths Museum, Bath.

Britain inasmuch as he named himself as a member of the Treveri whose lands were in the Moselle Valley.

He brought his deities with him, but his dedication reveals his worship of a male divinity with a double name: one Roman and one native, coupled with a female deity whose name, Nemetona, is entirely Gaulish, meaning 'goddess of the sacred grove'. Her name may be significant in terms of Druidism because of the association between the Druids and sacred groves mentioned by Classical writers such as Lucan, Tacitus and Pliny. Loucetius means 'god of light' and his coupling with the Roman god Mars is interesting. In Gaul and Britain, this war deity seems to have assumed the role of tribal protector in the war against disease.³⁰

The inscriptions from Bath, quoted above, are just two of many such instances of epigraphic dedications from the thermal healing sanctuary beside the river Avon at Bath, whose great Classically styled temple dedicated to Sulis Minerva was built on the site of vigorous and sacred hot springs, by Roman army engineers only about twenty years or so after the Claudian invasion of AD 43. The numerous altars here follow a distinctive set of naming patterns used in addressing the goddess: to 'Sulis' alone or to Sulis Minerva; in cases where both names are mentioned, the local one is (with only one exception) mentioned first. Sulis is a Gallo-British name (probably associated with the sun). Her equation with Minerva here may well have arisen because the Roman goddess was linked with the craft of healing. It is clear from this name patterning that Sulis was the indigenous personification of the healing hot springs at Bath and that she pre-existed the Roman development of the sacred site. There is evidence that prior to the Roman period, pilgrims approached the sacred springs through 'the alder swamp' surrounding it.³¹ Perhaps this was itself perceived as a sacred grove. It is known that alder was one of the woods chosen for the carving of the few sacred images that have survived from the early Iron Age: they include the large female figure from Ballachulish in Argyll, dating from the seventh century BC and found in a small remote bog, pinned down as though replicating a human bog sacrifice.³²

Any supposed connection between the kind of 'subversive' religious statements displayed in the epigraphy and iconography of Roman Britain and Gaul can be nothing more than circumstantial. But it appears that some influential and organized Gallo-British movements were at work, acting as contributors, or even resisters, to *romanitas*, at large, well-endowed sacred establishments, such as the temple to Sulis Minerva at Bath, whose very construction was at the hands of architects and engineers belonging to the Roman army. I think that the indigenous Gallo-British religious

leaders, who had wielded great power before absorption into the Roman empire, responded to the new threat partly by subversion but also, more subtly, by ‘going along with’ the new regime but at the same time quietly manipulating it in tune with British beliefs and rites.

Ancestral memories: old ways and the sacred

To Jupiter Best and Greatest, His Perfection Lucius
Septimius . . . governor of Britannia Prima, restored [this
monument], being a citizen of Reims.

This statue and column erected under the ancient religion
Septimius restores, ruler of Britannia Prima.
(COLLINGWOOD AND WRIGHT, 1965, NO. 103)³³

Religion is a notoriously conservative thing; beliefs are hard to dislodge. Septimius identifies himself in two significant ways: he was first and foremost the emperor’s representative for one of the four sub-divisions of the Roman province of Britannia, after it had been sub-divided by the emperor Diocletian in AD 296.³⁴ Second, this man presents himself as hailing from Rheims, capital of the Remi, whose tribal territory lay in north-east Gaul, part of the powerful confederacy of the Belgae (most of whose inhabitants had been fiercely independent and had been vigorously resistant to Caesar way back in the 50s BC, with the exception of the Remi).³⁵ The column mentioned in Septimius’s dedication almost certainly refers to a class of monument known as Jupiter columns. These were particularly popular in eastern Gaul and the Rhine frontier in the second and third centuries AD, and their imagery combines (or even fuses) Roman and Gallic religious expression. They consist of a basal plinth that contained the dedication above which stood circular or octagonal stones bearing divine images, supporting a tall column soaring sometimes as high as 15 metres (46 feet). On the summit was an elaborate Corinthian capital that supports the most important element of the monument: a statue of an armed Jupiter on horseback, the front hooves of his mount trampling down a monster, half-man, half-serpent.³⁶ Apart from Septimius’s dedication which specifically alludes to a column, a splendid Corinthian capital also comes from Corinium,³⁷ probably once part of the same monument. Jupiter columns present a splendid amalgam of Roman and Gallic elements: the dedications to Jupiter, the basal figures and the Corinthian

capitals are all demonstrably Roman, but in Classical imagery, Jupiter is never mounted, and the hybrid monster being trampled is also foreign to the Roman artistic repertoire. Gaulish warriors were renowned for their cavalry skills, and this may be why Gallic sculptors and their commissioners put the sky-god on a horse. Moreover, high-denomination Gallo-British Iron Age coinage frequently displays a horse accompanied by celestial symbols.³⁸ So, to my mind, Jupiter columns essentially represent a manipulation or appropriation of *romanitas* by *gallitas*. For the Gauls, the Roman sky-god, hoisted high on his pillar, became a warrior, a champion of light over darkness (as represented by the snake-man).

So, what did Lucius Septimius mean by 'the old religion'? Despite his proudly proclaimed and exalted position in the Roman hierarchy, he also called himself a Remic citizen, a deliberate reference to his Gallic identity. The heyday of Jupiter columns had passed by the end of the third century AD, so perhaps the dedication contained nostalgic memory for both a largely lapsed belief and a reminder of the dedicant's Gallic origins.

The abode of Medugenus: Thetford revisited

As we saw in Chapter Six, in the years immediately preceding the Boudican revolt of AD 60, the Icenian people constructed a huge sacro-political enclosure at Fison Way, Thetford (Norfolk): a great rectangular open space, bounded by nine massive concentric oak fences, inside which were large round wooden buildings. This was systematically destroyed by the Roman army. If, as is quite possible, this place had represented a venue for major British tribal – or even Druidic – gatherings (like the Carnutian annual Druidic assembly described by Caesar), then the Romans' need to expunge it is easy to comprehend.

But the memory of this huge 'sanctuary' (if this is what it was) did not fade entirely away. More than 300 years later, someone or a community deposited a fabulously rich hoard of treasure at exactly the same spot where once stood the great first-century enclosure.³⁹ The cache's location was so precisely associated with the old site as to make coincidence virtually impossible, and it is difficult to argue for anything other than the endurance of sacred memory from the early Roman period until about AD 390 when the treasure was hidden. The hoard appears to have comprised many sacred objects including thirty-three silver spoons, probably originally belonging to a religious guild, and they may well have been used as votive offerings, once holding measures of wine or oil that were part of the gift to the gods long after Christianity was established in Britain in the early fourth century AD.⁴⁰ Many of the spoons were inscribed, in

the Gaulish or British language, with the names of otherwise unknown – presumably local – deities, whose names were sometimes coupled with the obscure Italian woodland god Faunus, as a bringer of abundant corn or fruit. And one spoon was dedicated to Medugenus ('the mead-begotten one'),⁴¹ nudging one's thinking along the lines of intoxication, trance and shamanism (see Figure 51).



FIGURE 51 Gilded silver spoon dedicated to Medugenus, from the fourth-century AD hoard from Fison Way, Thetford. © Nick Griffiths.

The offerings from late Roman Thetford resonate with earlier finds associated with Gallo-British religion and – perhaps – linked ultimately to the Druids, such as the string of weird god names reminiscent of those listed on the Chartres *thuribula*. And, just maybe, the spoons themselves find their earlier manifestations in the pairs of spoons from late Iron Age ritual contexts in Britain. The Roman poet Ausonius mentions a dynasty of Gallic Druids surviving until his own time, in the fourth century AD. Could it be that this long-lived priesthood left its ancient footprints long after it lost its power base in the mid-first century? The contents of this chapter suggest exactly that. The Druids' dying embers in late Roman Britain might be imagined in the ceremonial site of Fison Way, Thetford, despite its apparent voicelessness in the centuries between its first importance as a place of independent Icenian identity, at the time of the Boudican

rebellion, and its last, as a repository for sacred offerings, when *romanitas* itself was under threat.

Notes

- ¹ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 1. 444–6; trans. Robert Graves, Lucan, *The Pharsalia: Dramatic Episodes of the Civil Wars* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), p. 38.
- ² Paul-Marie Duval, *Paris Antique* (Paris: Hermann, 1961), pp. 197–9, fig. 105;
- ³ M. J. Green, ‘Tanarus, Taranis and the Chester Altar’, *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society*, 65 (1982), 37–44; Miranda J. Green, *The Wheel as a Cult-Symbol in the Romano-Celtic World* (Brussels: Collection Latomus 183, 1984), pp. 251–64.
- ⁴ For example, on a silver plaque dedicated to Mars Teutates from Barkway, Hertfordshire: J. M. C. Toynbee, ‘A Londinium votive leaf or feather and its fellows’, in J. Bird, H. Chapman and J. Clark (eds), *Collectanea Londiniensia: Studies in London Archaeology and History Presented to Ralph Merrifield* (London: London and Middlesex Archaeology, 1978), pp. 129–48, no. 6; British Museum, *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1964), p. 62. For the less clear evidence for this god in Gallo-Roman contexts, see Jan de Vries, *Les Dieux des Celtes* (Paris: Payot, 1963), pp. 53–8; Paul-Marie Duval, *Les Dieux de la Gaule* (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1976), pp. 29–31.
- ⁵ A term used by Jane Webster in describing the new order of presenting the gods by name (epigraphy) and by formalized imaging on an ‘industrial’ scale: J. Webster, ‘The divine diaspora: problematizing Celtic deities on Hadrian’s Wall’, a paper delivered at the *4th Annual Colloquium on Thinking about Celtic Mythology in the 21st Century, with special reference to archaeology* (Edinburgh: School of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 19–21 November 2016); Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia: The Gods and Rituals of Roman Britain* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 218.
- ⁶ For the most accessible account of the Chartres sanctuary, see M. J. Aldhouse-Green, ‘The Magician’s House. Druids, Prayers and Magic in Roman Gaul’, in R. Haeussler and A. King (eds), *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period: Personal, Local, and Global* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2017), pp. 325–38.
- ⁷ Meaning ‘wizard’ or ‘magician’.
- ⁸ Whose name derives from the root word ‘dru’.
- ⁹ Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: Batsford, 1987), pp. 159–63; Robert Philpott, *Burial Practices in Roman Britain: a Survey of Grave Treatment and Furnishing, AD 43–410* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports (British Series) 219, 1991), pp. 77–89 (for Kimmeridge); J. L. Macdonald, ‘Religion’, in G. Clarke, *The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills* (Oxford: Winchester Studies 3, Pre-Roman and Roman Winchester, 1979), pp. 403–33 [415–24] (for Winchester).
- ¹⁰ T. C. Lethbridge, ‘Further Excavations in the Early Iron Age and Romano-British Cemetery at Guilden Morden’, *Cambridge Antiquarian Communications*, 36 (1936), 109–120.

- ¹¹ A. Chapman, 'Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement and a Middle Saxon Cemetery at Great Houghton, Northampton, 1996', *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, 29 (2000–1), 1–42.
- ¹² Bernard Mees, *Celtic Curses* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009).
- ¹³ A hypoplastic Hamulus (a reduced hook on the hamate wrist bone): Chapman, 'Excavation . . . Great Houghton', p. 11. This would have impacted heavily upon some domestic duties expected of Iron Age people, especially (probably) women, such as spinning and weaving; this may have been one reason why she may have been given tasks unaffected by this disability, such as corn grinding and hide scraping.
- ¹⁴ The vestigial extra thumbs of one of the people sacrificed at Lindow Moss come to mind, as another special ritual associated with bodily difference: D. Brothwell and J. B. Bourke, 'The Human Remains from Lindow Moss 1987–8', in R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife (eds), *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 52–61, especially p. 57, fig. 24.
- ¹⁵ Mees, *Celtic Curses*, pp. 58–9.
- ¹⁶ Tacitus, *Germania*, 9; trans. H. Mattingly, *Tacitus on Britain and Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), p. 108.
- ¹⁷ M. J. Green, 'God in man's image: thoughts on the genesis and affiliations of some Romano-British cult-imagery', *Britannia*, 29 (1998c), 17–30.
- ¹⁸ Martin Henig, *Roman Sculpture from the Cotswold Region* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [for the British Academy], 1993), p. 32, no. 93, pl. 26, top left.
- ¹⁹ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 236–7, fig. 8.8, with references; M. J. Green, *Symbol and Image*, fig. 36.
- ²⁰ For detail on the range of shape-shifting shamanic practice, see Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams, *The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and Magic in the Painted Caves* (New York: Harry Ibrams, 1998); J. D. Lewis-William, 'Southern African shamanistic rock art in its social and cognitive contexts', in Neil Price (ed.), *The Archaeology of Shamanism* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 17–39; R. J. Wallis, 'Waking Ancestor Spirits: Neo-Shamanic Engagements with Archaeology', in Price (ed.), *The Archaeology of Shamanism*, pp. 213–30; Miranda Aldhouse-Green and Stephen Aldhouse-Green, *The Quest for the Shaman* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005).
- ²¹ Colette Pommeret, *Le Sanctuaire Antique des Bolards à Nuits-Saint-George (Côte d'Or)* (Dijon: *Revue Archéologique de l'Est*, Seizième Supplément, 2001), Inv. No. 82, figs. 8–9; Ernest Planson and Colette Pommeret, *Les Bolards* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 1986).
- ²² Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman: Voyages of the Soul, Trance, Ecstasy and Healing from Siberia to the Amazon* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 66–9.
- ²³ A theory based upon their intensely black plumage and their diet of carrion and predation on the eggs and fledglings of smaller birds. Ravens were clearly linked with the otherworld in Celtic mythology, particularly in Ireland, where goddesses of war and death, such as the Morrigna (singular Morrigan), possessed the ability to shape-change between human and raven form and had

- the habit of haunting battlefields, prophesying the outcome and feeding on the slain: Eileen O'Faoláin, *Irish Myths and Sagas* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1986), p. 109; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *The Celtic Myths* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015b), pp. 58 and 146–8.
- ²⁴ D. Serjeantson and J. Morris, 'Ravens and Crows in Iron Age and Roman Britain', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 30 (1), (2011), 85–107.
- ²⁵ D. Serjeantson, 'Ravens and crows in Iron Age Britain: the Danebury corvids', in W. Prummel, J. Zeiler and D. Brinkhuisen (eds), *Proceedings of the 6th Bird Working Group Meeting, Groningen 2008* (Groningen: Groningen Archaeological Studies, 2010), pp. 175–85, fig. 1.
- ²⁶ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 86–7; Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 136–8.
- ²⁷ From Bath: R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, Vol. I: Inscriptions on Stone* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 44, no. 140.
- ²⁸ From Bath: Collingwood and Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, p. 46, no. 144.
- ²⁹ From Bath: Collingwood and Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, p. 47, no. 146.
- ³⁰ Émile Thevenot, *Divinités et sanctuaires de la Gaule* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), pp. 46–71.
- ³¹ Barry Cunliffe, *Roman Bath* (London: Batsford/English Heritage, 1995), p. 14.
- ³² Bryony Coles, 'Wood species for Wooden Figures: A Glimpse of a Pattern', in A. Gibson and D. Simpson (eds), *Prehistoric Ritual and Religion* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998), pp. 163–75, table 13.1, p. 164; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Bog Bodies Uncovered: Solving Europe's Ancient Mystery* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015a), p. 179.
- ³³ Collingwood and Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, p. 30, no. 103.
- ³⁴ David Mattingly, *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), pp. 226–9, fig. 9.
- ³⁵ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 2. 3.
- ³⁶ Gerhard Bauchhenß and Peter Nölke, *Die Jupitersäulen in den germanischen Provinzen* (Köln/Bonn: Rheinland-Verlag GMBH/ Rudolf Habelt Verlag GMBH, 1981).
- ³⁷ Henig, *Roman Sculpture from the Cotswold Region*, pp. 8–9, no. 18, pls 5–7.
- ³⁸ For example, see John Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 48, fig. 2.7; Miranda Green, *The Sun Gods of Ancient Europe* (London: Batsford, 1991), p. 118, fig. 91a.
- ³⁹ Catherine Johns and Timothy Potter, *The Thetford Treasure: Roman Jewellery and Silver* (London: British Museum Publications, 1983).
- ⁴⁰ Johns and Potter, *The Thetford Treasure*, pp. 34–45; K. S. Painter, 'Silver Hoards from Britain in their late Roman Contexts', *L'Antiquité Tardive*, 5, 93–110.
- ⁴¹ K. Jackson, 'The Inscriptions on the Silver Spoons', in Johns and Potter, *The Thetford Treasure*, pp. 46–8.

Chapter Nine

IDEAS OF AFTERLIFE: DEATH, BURIAL AND REINCARNATION

One of the things which the Druids teach has become common knowledge, namely that men's souls are everlasting, and enter upon another life among the shades of the departed; and this they declare so that men should be the better for the wars.

(POMPONIUS MELA, *DE CHOROGRAPHIA*, 3. 2)¹

The writer of the above, Pomponius Mela, was born at the town of Tingentera in southern Spain and was writing in the mid-first century AD. His comments concerning Druidic doctrines of reincarnation closely follow Caesar, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus. And Lucan, too, wrote similarly of the Druids' teaching of reincarnation and that, 'if they are right, death is merely a point of change in perpetual existence'.² Mela's words about the reason for such Druidic teaching, namely to cancel men's fear of dying in battle, are surely copied, virtually verbatim, from Caesar, who says – somewhat cynically – that this belief encouraged bravery because 'it removes the fear of death'.³ As discussed in Chapter Two, these Classical writers made links between Druidic 'belief' in life after death and Pythagoras's teaching about the ever-turning cycle of reincarnation.⁴ The question for this chapter is to what extent, if any, are these allegedly Druidic tenets borne out by archaeological evidence? Two (related) aspects of this enquiry are considered: the nature of certain burial customs that imply belief in an afterlife; and, second, further examination of evidence (already hinted at in earlier chapters dealing with the presence of liturgical regalia in graves, for instance at Cerrig-y-Drudion and at Deal) for 'Druidic' burials.

Letters to the dead

[F]or the belief in Pythagoras is strong among them [the Gauls], that the souls of men are immortal, and that after a definite number of years they live a second life when the soul passes into another body. This is the reason given why some people at the burial of the dead cast upon the pyre letters written to their dead relatives, thinking that the dead will be able to read them.

(DIDORUS SICULUS, *LIBRARY OF HISTORY*, 5. 28)⁵

This is strange testimony, given that the habit of writing in pre-Roman Gaul appears – from archaeological evidence – to have been virtually confined to the odd word on Iron Age coins. And we have Caesar’s comment – from the coalface, as it were – that the Druids frowned upon writing, even for the purposes of their own teaching.⁶ However, it is not impossible that people did write messages to their dead on organic materials, such as wood or tree bark, to be tossed on funeral pyres for consumption with the corpse and to accompany them to the next world. Archaeological evidence for letter-writing, using such materials, is well attested by the extraordinary deposits by the Roman fort of Vindolanda (Chesterholm), just south of Hadrian’s Wall, where vast numbers of letters and other documents have been preserved through the freak accident of preservation in damp, anaerobic conditions.⁷ We also know, from lead curse tablets and other artefacts, such as the Coligny Calendar (see Chapters Seven and Eight) that the Gaulish language was fully developed in written form by the early Roman period, and may well have been used earlier in documents inscribed on long-perished organic materials.

Writing letters to the dead, if such a custom were genuinely present among the Gauls (and maybe also in Britannia), reinforces ideas of after-life and rebirth that the evidence of grave offerings presents with such cogency. While the majority of the Iron Age dead may have been buried or burned with little ceremony and an absence of grave goods, others indicate care and ceremony, together with tomb offerings that strongly suggest the need for the dead to have provisions for their journey to the otherworld.

Tomb studies

Although Gaul is not a rich country, funerals there are splendid and costly. Everything the dead man is thought to have been fond of is put on the pyre, including even animals. Not long ago, slaves and dependants known to have been their masters' favourites were burned with them at the end of the funeral.

(CAESAR, *DE BELLO GALLICO*, 6. 19)⁸

The Red Lady of the Brigantes

When I try to sleep at night, I can only dream in red. The outside world is black and white, with only one colour dead.

(PETER GABRIEL, *BIKO*, 1980)⁹

In April 2001, archaeologists discovered something extraordinary at Wetwang in East Yorkshire: the burial of a woman with her war chariot; she probably died in the Middle Iron Age (400–300 BC), when she was about thirty-five years old. She was carefully placed in her tomb with rich grave furniture, including the dismantled chariot, its chassis, pole and yoke for two ponies placed over her body. Her torso had been covered with joints of pork and a mirror was laid across her lower legs; the horse-gear interred with her had been lavishly decorated with red coral, imported from the Mediterranean region.¹⁰ The most singular thing about this woman's physiology was the presence of a large facial tumour that deformed the bones around her nose, leaving a tell-tale legacy on her skeleton. This kind of tumour is bright red and very disfiguring, yet she appears to have enjoyed high rank in her community and was buried with elaborate ceremony. And might it be that her very malady was celebrated by the presence of red coral in her grave goods? There is no evidence to identify her with the Druids, but it is not impossible that she held sacro-political powers within her tribe, as did one of her descendants, Cartimandua, ruler of the Brigantes and client-queen in alliance with the Romans in the mid-first century AD.¹¹

In support of the possibility that the 'red lady' of Wetwang possessed spiritual powers, another female chariot burial from Wetwang may be cited. In the summer of 1984, a pair of such burials was found, each within a square barrow next to each other. A man and a woman had been interred, each with their chariot, the funerary ritual very similar to that of the 'red

lady'. The man's tomb was furnished with warrior equipment, including seven spears but, interestingly, the female was interred with far richer grave goods than her companion, and made of bronze rather than iron; among the offerings placed with her was a mirror, and a curious sealed bronze canister (see Figure 52) with a chain attached to it.¹² This was clearly a personal belonging, and I wonder whether it once held some special substance, maybe even a mind-altering drug, that marked her out as a ritualist. Or might it have contained diverse 'ritual' equipment, similar to the 'medicine bundles', bags of special objects, carried by many traditional shamans, past and present?¹³ Perhaps the vessel was sealed at her death, in order to keep its contents secret beyond the grave and to protect the living from its contents, too dangerous to remain in the earth-world without its living keeper.



FIGURE 52 Bronze sealed canister decorated with La Tène designs, from an Iron Age female chariot-burial at Wetwang, East Yorkshire. © Hull and East Riding Museum: Hull Museums.

The mirrors, placed in both these women's graves, were special, valuable objects and may well have belonged to seers, 'wise women' who could manipulate the 'real' world by using their shining mirrors to see beyond and behind, to distort images, and to see double – but not quite, because of reversal. And because an ancient bronze mirror, despite its polish, reflected a blurred reality, its holder might 'see' other, spiritual worlds. Mirrors catch the light, reflect it, throw it, and use it to dazzle. They could

be powerful tools for the ritualist, the seer or shaman, to weave spells and pass beyond earthly boundaries to otherworlds.¹⁴ Mirrors could be dangerous and revered, and so might their owners have been.¹⁵

The priest-physicians of Tartigny

There is evidence that some Gaulish priests (possibly Druids) may have had special status in death as in life. A cemetery dating to the late third century BC in northern Gaul, east of the Seine, has been tentatively identified as exclusive to a group of priest-doctors (reminiscent, perhaps, of the 'doctor's grave' at Stanway, Colchester (Chapter Seven), at Tartigny (Oise), in the land of the Bellovaci.¹⁶ Generally, so-called 'priestly' Iron Age tombs are lone burials,¹⁷ but at Tartigny five rich cremation graves were found, close together, each similar in form to the other. Every grave contained a spacious mortuary chamber demarcated by a rectangular 'temenos' (sacred boundary) bounded by a deep ditched enclosure. The incinerated remains of each dead person were accompanied by grave goods that indicated their owners' occupation(s) in life – and – perhaps perceived as also continuing after death (see Figure 53).



FIGURE 53 Iron-stave-bound wooden bucket, with sacrificial equipment, from a tomb in the third-century BC cemetery at Tartigny, France. © Centre archéologique européen du Mont Beuvray.

These included cylindrical stave-bound buckets, spoons, bowls, razors, knives (maybe used in sacrificial or divinatory rituals) and one iron object that appears to be a dual-purpose medical instrument with a scalpel at one end and a pair of forceps or pincers at the other.¹⁸ The reverence accorded these persons in life went with them to their graves. The implements buried with them may have been too sacred, too spiritually charged, even too perilous to remain in earthly circulation. And it is also possible that their owners took their skills, and the means to practise them, into the next world.

Folly Lane

Shortly after the Claudian invasion of AD 43, the death of a Catuvellaunian chieftain was treated with great ceremony and splendour at Folly Lane, Verulamium.¹⁹ A great rectilinear ditched enclosure had, at its centre, a deeply sunken funerary chamber that had contained a great pyre. In the chamber were the burnt remains of pyre goods, together with other rich (unburnt) grave goods. This in itself was significant, in terms of the undoubted splendour of the ceremonies that attended this man's passing. But what, to me, is more significant is the discovery of three female inhumation burials carefully placed in the enclosure ditch east of the entranceway.²⁰ They were of different ages – one about twenty-five years old, the second between thirty-five and forty-five and the third between thirty and fifty – but perhaps from the same family. They had all been interred at the time that the ditch had been dug and it is hard to avoid the possibility that they were killed and placed there in some kind of ritual event associated with the high-status cremation. It is interesting that these women were given inhumation burials, unlike the chieftain, and this method of disposal may well reflect their inferior status. In my opinion, it is likely that they had been part of the great man's household, as servants or other dependents, and were killed in order to accompany him to the next world, just as Caesar describes as occurred in Gaul (see quotation above), even though the Roman general's comments imply that the custom had lapsed there by the time he recorded it.²¹

Ghost armies: from Gondole to Pocklington

'The Dead are following', said Legolas. 'I see shapes of Men and of horses, and pale banners like shreds of cloud, and spears like winter-thickets on a misty night. The Dead are following.'

(TOLKIEN, *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, PART 3, 1955)²²

In the third part of Tolkien's great trilogy, *The Lords of the Rings*, when the forces of Middle Earth faced their most desperate battles against Sauron, Lord of Darkness, their leader Aragorn summoned the Grey Army of the Dead to aid them. These were the souls of oath-breakers who shirked battle in life and who were unable find peace in death until they had fulfilled their oath to fight. This Aragorn promised them if they would now join his army to defeat evil.

In 2002, rescue archaeologists excavated a strange cemetery in the Auvergne, just outside the late Iron Age fortified settlement at Gondole, in the territory of the Arverni.²³ This tribe formed the centre of Gallic resistance to Caesar's conquest of Gaul, led by the local war leader Vercingetorix. What they found was astonishing: dating from around the time of Caesar's occupation, in the mid-50s BC, eight cavalymen were buried with their war horses. The men's bodies were carefully posed, so that the left hand of each rested on the shoulder of his neighbour *and* those of their mounts were similarly positioned, each with a forelimb next to or touching its fellow. The men were almost certainly of high rank, the kind of person to whom Caesar alludes in his discussion of Gallic funerary practices, because ownership and the care of horses did not come cheap. But despite this, no grave goods were found with the bodies. Of the various possible circumstances that might have led to such curious burials,²⁴ my favoured interpretation of the Gondole interments is that these horsemen formed a protective ghost army, guarding the fortress gates against the enemies of the *oppidum's* occupants. If that were so, they may have been regarded as 'undead', like Tolkien's grey army of oath-breakers, but, conversely, as honoured warriors who needed only their horses to accompany them to the otherworld when their guardianship of the living was no longer required.²⁵ The mystery remains, though, inasmuch as the Gondole skeletons showed no sign of battle-injuries. Might they have been human sacrifices committed by the Arverni, *in extremis*, in the hope of preventing defeat by Caesar's army?

Between 2017 and 2019, a remarkable Iron Age cemetery was uncovered at Pocklington in East Yorkshire. It contained a series of square barrows containing chariot burials, similar to the ones at Wetwang considered earlier. But where the Pocklington graves differ is in the presence not only of the war chariot but the chariot ponies as well.²⁶ And the latest find, made in January 2019, was even more startling: a small circular barrow contained the burial of a young man, between seventeen and twenty-five years old, with a spear. His nose had been broken twice and healed before he died. But after his death, his body was stabbed with several spears, as

if in a kind of ‘ghost killing’, perhaps involving several fellow warriors.²⁷ Next to this barrow was a much larger, square one containing the body of a man in his late forties. He was interred with a chariot, intact and upright, as if ready for battle.²⁸ All the more incredible were the positions of the chariot ponies, their bodies poised as if to leap out of the grave. These burials date from the third century BC.

Several queries arise from this double burial. What was the relationship between the young man in his round barrow and his elder with his war chariot and leaping horses? Why was the young man’s body bristling with spears? Why was the older man’s chariot poised to carry him into the thick of battle? And, lastly, what can these graves tell us about attitudes to the afterlife and the involvement of professional ritualists, maybe even Druids? All tentative answers to such questions must rely on circumstantial evidence. The younger man might have been a comrade-in-arms, or maybe even a son or nephew. But why the post-mortem spearing? There is a faint possibility that he did not die in battle but was sacrificed to accompany the warlord to the next world. The multiple spear-thrusts might represent ‘collective responsibility’, wherein several people shared the burden of the killing – rather like the murder of Julius Caesar by the conspirators led by Brutus and Cassius in 44 BC. The manner of his death is likely to be closely linked to the identity of the older man, clearly a seasoned war hero, who was given full battle honours. And maybe the Druidic doctrine of reincarnation was reflected in the careful posing of the chariot and horses, ready to burst through the bonds and boundaries imposed by death and bear their champion back into earthly warfare. Whether or not the Druids themselves were involved in these elaborate funerary rituals, the formality and elaboration of such Iron Age burial practices suggest the presence of professional ritualists who oversaw the interments of people whose deaths needed to be accorded particular attention, whether those of revered warriors, like the Pocklington charioteers or the shamed, such as the bound woman with her broken lead torc, from Great Houghton (see Chapter Eight).

Excarnating the dead

To these men death in battle is glorious; and they consider it a crime to burn the body of such a warrior; for they believe that the soul goes up to the gods in heaven, if the body is devoured on the field by the hungry vulture.

(SILIUS ITALICUS, *PUNICA*, 3)²⁹

Tiberius Silius Italicus was born in AD 26. He was highly regarded in Roman imperial circles, particularly for his exemplary governorship of the province of Asia. His main work was *Punica*, an immensely long epic poem about the Second Punic War between Rome and the Carthaginians. For a large part of his detailed narrative, he relied heavily on other sources, including Livy, Varro and Posidonius. This quotation describes the practice of excarnation (exposure of dead bodies to be consumed by birds and other scavengers) among the Celtiberians of north-east Spain. He was not alone in making this observation. A later author, Claudius Aelianus, wrote similarly, of a tribe called the Vaccaeii, just to the west of the main Celtiberian region. He observed that they despised those who died natural deaths – from disease, accident or old age – as having met ignoble ends and so whose bodies were consigned to the flames. But, by contrast, the bodies of those who died in battle were treated as heroes and left for the vultures to consume because such birds were considered sacred and enabled the noble soul to rise to the sky where the gods resided.³⁰

Aelian had probably read Italicus's work and was perhaps influenced by other ethnographical pieces too. But there is a scattering of archaeological evidence for what, in other cultures,³¹ might be termed 'sky burials' notably in Celtiberia itself. Excavation of some of the great Iron Age fortified centres (*oppida*) there, notably Numancia and Tiermes, has revealed the presence of polychrome pottery decorated with scenes that appear to show the exposure of a dead warrior, on whose body perches a large pecking bird, possibly a vulture.³² At the intricately excavated Iron Age hillfort of Danebury in Hampshire, there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that excarnation practices might have taken place. The main form of dwelling here was the roundhouse, but several four-post rectangular structures there may have had a different purpose. They might have been granaries or even shrines.³³ However, an alternative explanation could be that they were excarnation platforms.³⁴ It is significant, in this regard, that the disused grain silos found at Danebury contained incomplete skeletonized bodies and articulated and disarticulated body parts (see Figure 54), as well as complete skeletons.³⁵ And this is especially interesting because the bodies of domestic animals, such as horses, were sometimes similarly treated.

It would be very far-fetched to assume that these – possibly exposed – bodies of the deceased can be identified in any way with the Druids. But the vast majority of the Iron Age dead are 'archaeologically invisible'³⁶ and, given the comments concerning Celtiberian excarnation practices, it is not impossible that particular attention was given to special individuals.



FIGURE 54 Disembodied human skull, from a disused grain silo at Danebury, Hampshire. © The Danebury Trust.

Several Iron Age sites in southern Britain, including Danebury, have produced evidence that excarnation may have been practised. And it may be that, as with other eccentric burials considered above, such as Folly Lane, Wetwang and Tartigny, professional religious functionaries were involved, at least in a participatory capacity.

Dismembering the dead: from Ribemont to Hornish

I have nothing to tell except that its inhabitants are more
savage than the Britons since they are man-eaters as well as
herb-eaters.

(STRABO, *GEOGRAPHY*, 4. 5)³⁷

One of the more grisly finds among the pit burials at Danebury was the pelvic girdle of a young man that 'showed positive signs of butchery': his legs had been chopped off, then by a combination of cutting and chopping, his pelvis severed from his torso.³⁸ What was going on here and what happened to the rest of his body? Was this man eaten or, more likely perhaps, was his dismemberment part of a particular ritual wherein his loins were designed as a votive offering to the gods of fertility, just as the original use of the grain silos at Danebury was to keep the seed-corn sweet and fertile for the coming year?

One of the great Middle Iron Age Gallic war sanctuaries (considered first in Chapter Three) was Ribemont-sur-Ancre in Picardy.³⁹ Here, as at its sister-shrine of Gournay-sur-Aronde, there is evidence that victorious armies sometimes dismembered their war prisoners after taking them back from the battlefield to sacred places. But Ribemont exhibited a particular feature: the construction of four massive ossuaries built from human long-bones, together with those of horses, placed at the four corners of a great enclosure, perhaps the remains of an entire army. Headless bodies were first strung up in the temple before their arms and legs were quarried for building materials for the bone-houses. Was such action associated with the humiliation of the defeated? Were they human sacrificial victims? An important point about Ribemont, Gournay and similar Gaulish 'war sanctuaries' is the elaboration, precision and intricacy of ritual procedure: this speaks – to me at least – of professional religious leadership.

Children's bodies were not exempt from ritual dismemberment in the British Iron Age. Two sites come to mind: a substantive hillfort at Wandlebury (Cambridgeshire) and a house at Hornish, in the Western Isles of Scotland. In a shallow grave-pit within the hillfort was the dismembered upper body of a child; forensic investigation suggests that the severing of the legs was the cause of death, rather than post-mortem dismemberment. The body part present in the grave was then wrapped in a bag, a bronze needle sealing the opening. The remains were carefully positioned face down in the pit, with no grave goods.⁴⁰ At Hornish, the body of a boy, about twelve years old, was cut and sawn into quarters. The four pieces were then carefully placed each in a pit, together with the butchered body parts of cattle and sheep; the thinking is that these human and animal remains represent a domestic foundation-sacrifice, designed to bless the new house built on the site marked by the pits at each corner.⁴¹ Unlike the situation at Ribemont, this vignette of ritual practice was a private act of deference to the gods. But there is an unrecorded story behind the choice of this boy for such a savage request to the spirits for the good luck of the

house and its inhabitants. Who was the boy? Why was he chosen? Were local clergy involved or did the builders/owners of the dwelling carry out the ritual butchery themselves?

Cremation and inhumation: Druidic decisions on afterlives

My great-aunt once told me that robins are the souls of the departed: this is why they come so close and their company feels so intimate. They are the people you once knew visiting from beyond.
(MAIKLEM, 2020)⁴²

Throughout this chapter, the discussion on burial rituals has ranged over many forms of body disposal. Both inhumation and cremation were practised in Iron Age Gaul and Britain. Fashions for burying bodies or burning them came and went, just as they do today. Decisions may have been associated with the kinds of afterlife envisaged for the dead. For transmigration of souls into different bodies or for bodily reincarnation, one would have thought that the remains of the deceased needed to go whole into their graves. But cremation might also have provided a fast track to heaven in the rising of the essence of the dead, in smoke and ashes, depending on where the otherworld was deemed to be and the perceived location of the gods.

I want to end this chapter with allusion to a cemetery attached to one settlement in later Iron Age Gaul: Acy-Romance in the Ardennes region.⁴³ Two distinct burial practices were identified by excavators: high-status cremation graves with rich grave goods, such as buckets, amphorae and military equipment; and, by contrast, the mummified bodies of young men, buried in sunken boxes, in seated positions, legs crossed, their upper bodies bent over almost double, with no tomb offerings at all. One further unburnt body seems to confirm the lower status of the inhumed box burials: the skeleton of another young man, who lay stretched out, hands crossed over as if manacled. He died from a heavy blow to his head from a weapon with a peculiarly shaped blade, as if specially made for a ritual purpose. One of the rich cremation-graves contained an axe with an identical blade, and it must have been the same implement that felled the young, bound man. Animal bones at Acy showed signs of feasting on a grand scale, particularly on ewe meat. Votive offerings, including 200 miniature iron lances, are indicative of gifts to the gods of war. The dead

of Agy show a complex range of burial rites. But it is hard not to come to the conclusion that at least one of the lavishly furnished cremation graves belonged to a high-ranking ritualist, who conducted ritualized murder with a sacred axe. And the boxed mummies were part of a highly complicated ritual practice that demanded the preservation of certain bodies, perhaps prisoners of war who, rather in the manner of bog bodies,⁴⁴ were disposed of in a way that prevented decay and thus, perhaps denied them entry into the next world. The Druids, or their kindred, would seem to have exercised a prerogative not only to sacrifice people but extended their authority to decide who or who should not enjoy reincarnation and a life after death.

Notes

- ¹ Pomponius Mela, *De Chorographia*, 3. 2. 19; trans. Nora Chadwick, *The Druids*, 2nd edition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 52.
- ² Lucan, *Pharsalia*; trans. Robert Graves, *Lucan, Pharsalia: Dramatic Episodes of the Civil War*, lines 441–5 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), p. 38.
- ³ Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 14; trans. Anne Wiseman and Peter Wiseman, *Julius Caesar: The Battle for Gaul* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 121.
- ⁴ Pythagoras was born in the later sixth century BC and emigrated from Samos to the Greek colony of Croton in southern Italy in order to escape from the oppressive regime of the tyrant Polycrates. It was at Croton that Pythagoras founded a religious society, with many followers, where he declaimed his views about rebirth: Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 296–301; Simon Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 119–25.
- ⁵ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5. 28. 6; trans. J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 (1959–60), 250.
- ⁶ *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 14.
- ⁷ Alan Bowman, *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), pp. 13–19; Anthony Birley, *Garrison Life at Vindolanda: A Band of Brothers* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002), pp. 21–31.
- ⁸ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6. 19; trans. Wiseman and Wiseman, *Julius Caesar*, p. 124.
- ⁹ From the Peter Gabriel song *Biko*, about the death in custody at Port Elizabeth (South Africa) of Steve Biko in 1977. The track was released in 1980.
- ¹⁰ J. D. Hill, 'A New Cart/Chariot Burial from Wetwang, East Yorkshire', *PAST*, 38 (2001), 1–2; M. Aldhouse-Green, 'Viragos and Virgins: Women in the Celtic World', in S. Lynn Budin and J. Macintosh Turfa (eds), *Women in Antiquity: Real Women Across the Ancient World* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1008–26, esp. pp. 1012–13.
- ¹¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 12. 32–36; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Boudica Britannia* (London: Pearson Longman, 2006a), pp. 123–30.

- ¹² J. Dent, 'Three Cart Burials from Wetwang, Yorkshire', *Antiquity*, 59 (1985), 85–92. Melanie Giles, *A Forged Glamour: Landscape, Identity and Material Culture in the Iron Age* (Oxford: Windgather Press/Oxbow, 2012), pp. 156–7, and fig. 5.15 (the canister).
- ¹³ C. Knüsel, 'Of Crystal Balls, Political Power and Changing Contexts: What the Clever Women of Salerno Inherited', in P. Baker and G. Carr (eds), *New Approaches in Medical Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2002), pp. 172–94. In First Nation American shamanistic communities, medicine bundles were containers of apparently random objects that had deep sacred meaning for their owners: they might include feathers, bones, seeds and dried medicinal plants: Ruth Underhill, *Red Man's Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 110–11.
- ¹⁴ M. Aldhouse-Green, 'Galadriel's Mirror. Reflections on Mirrors, Metals and Magic', a paper delivered at the *Didcot Mirror Study Day* (Woodstock: The Oxfordshire Museum, 7 February 2015).
- ¹⁵ As expressed, for instance, in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott*, where the mirror betrayed its owner; and in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where the elven queen Galadriel saw visions of the future of Middle Earth in her mirror. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Part 1, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 368–82 (originally published by George Allen and Unwin, 1954).
- ¹⁶ T. Lejars and F. Perrin, 'Des Tombes des Druides?' in V. Guichard and F. Perrin (eds), *L'Archéologue: Archéologie Nouvelle*, Hors Série 2 (2000), 37–40.
- ¹⁷ For example, the burial at Deal in Kent, where the 'priest', wearing his sacred diadem, was buried on his own at the outer edge of the cemetery at Mill Hill, Deal: Keith Parfitt, *Iron Age Burials from Mill Hill Deal* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 18–20; and the isolated Gallic Iron Age tombs containing liturgical equipment, such as knives, razors, spoons and bowls at St-Georges-lès-Baillargeaux (Vienne) and La Chaussée-sur-Marne (Marne): Lejars and Perrin, 'Des Tombes des Druides', pp. 39–40.
- ¹⁸ Lejars and Perrin 2000, 'Des Tombes des Druides', pl. on p. 37
- ¹⁹ Rosalind Niblett, *The Excavation of a Ceremonial Site at Folly Lane, Verulamium* (London: Britannia Monograph Series 14, Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1999); Rosalind Niblett, *Verulamium: The Roman City of St Albans* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), pp. 45–6.
- ²⁰ Niblett, *The Excavation of a Ceremonial Site at Folly Lane*, pp. 20–1, pls VIII, IX.
- ²¹ There is further evidence of human sacrificial behaviour at Folly Lane: the skull of an adolescent boy, his skull deliberately de-fleshed, was found in a pit outside a Romano-British temple. He died in the second century AD and forensic evidence suggests that his decapitated head was displayed on a pole outside the sanctuary for a time before being buried with a puppy and a whetstone (perhaps the very one used to sharpen the de-fleshing knife): Niblett, *Verulamium*, p. 111; Niblett, *The Excavation of a Ceremonial Site at Folly Lane*, pp. 314–20.

- ²² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Part 3, *The Return of the King* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 61–2 (originally published by George Allen and Unwin, 1955).
- ²³ N. Schlanger, 'Preventive Archaeology in France: saving the past for the future', *Minerva* 17 (5) (2006), 25–9.
- ²⁴ Including the idea that they were high-ranking prisoners of war who, nonetheless, were not deemed worthy to be accompanied by weapons or other grave goods: Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids* (Newhaven/London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 64–5.
- ²⁵ There is a possible parallel between the Gondole 'army' and the life-size granite statues of warriors placed around Iron Age Iberian *oppida*, presumably placed there to guard them: for example, at Lesenho in Portugal: A. Tranoy, 'Du héros au chef: l'image du Guerrier dans les sociétés indigènes du nord-ouest de la péninsule ibérique (Ile siècle avant J.-C.-Ier siècle après J.-C.)', in Université de Tours, *Actes du Colloque 16–17 mai 1987: Le Monde des Images en Gaule et dans les Provinces Voisines* (Paris: Errance/Caesarodunum), Tome 23, pp. 219–28.
- ²⁶ P. Ware, 'An Iron Age chariot burial. Excavating a square-barrow cemetery at Pocklington', *Current Archaeology*, 327 (June 2017), 26–31; K. Krakowka, 'Further chariot burial discovered at Pocklington', *Current Archaeology*, 347 (February 2019), 8. Most chariot burials of this kind contain the vehicle but not the ponies that pulled it.
- ²⁷ This phenomenon has been noted at other, similar, Iron Age burials in East Yorkshire: M. Giles, 'Transformational Implements and the control of substances in the middle-later Iron Age landscapes of East Yorkshire', presentation at a conference entitled *Warfare, Violence and Slavery in Prehistory and Protohistory* (Sheffield: The Prehistoric Society and University of Sheffield Archaeology Society, 2001); Ian Stead, *Iron Age Burials from East Yorkshire* (London: English Heritage, 1991b), p. 33.
- ²⁸ Most of the British Iron Age chariot burials contained dismantled vehicles, with the wheels leaning against the tomb walls and the chassis upturned over the body.
- ²⁹ Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 342–8; trans. Ernest Duff, *Silius Italicus Punica* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Edition, 1949), p. 139.
- ³⁰ Aelian, *De Natura Animalium*, 10. 22.
- ³¹ As, for instance, in Parsi, in Tibetan and in some New Guinea traditions. Mike Parker Pearson has discussed the exposure of bodies in trees, on platforms or on the ground, leaving no traces, which may be part of the reason for such choice: Michael Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1999), pp. 49 and 131. Several First Nation American peoples, including the Cheyenne and Sioux leave their dead on scaffolds. In traditions where excarnation is practised, the exposure of the body is followed by 'secondary burial': Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntingdon, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 97.

- ³² A. Jimeno Martínez, 'Religión y Ritual Funerario Celtibéricos', in *Revista de Soria*, 25 (1999), pp. 13–14, fig. on p. 13. Vultures are still a common feature in the skies over this region.
- ³³ Barry Cunliffe, *Danebury* (London: English Heritage, 1993), pp. 65–8 and 71–2.
- ³⁴ G. Carr and C. Knüsel, 'The ritual framework of excarnation by exposure as the mortuary practice of the early and middle Iron Ages of southern Britain', in A. Gwilt and C. Haselgrove (eds), *Reconstructing Iron Age Societies* (Oxford: Oxbow Monograph 71, 1997), pp. 167–73; Jeremy Hill, *Ritual and Rubbish in the Iron Age of Wessex* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports 242, 1995).
- ³⁵ Cunliffe, *Danebury*, pp. 100–8.
- ³⁶ Carr and Knüsel, 'The ritual framework of excarnation', p. 167.
- ³⁷ Strabo, *Geography*, 4. 5. 4; trans. H. L. Jones, *The Geography of Strabo* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Edition, 1923), p. 259. This terse comment referred to practices in Ireland and can probably be taken as an example of barbarization by a Greek writer: see Chapters One and Two, this volume.
- ³⁸ Cunliffe, *Danebury*, p. 105.
- ³⁹ Jean Louis Brunaux, *Les Gaulois: Sanctuaires et rites* (Paris: Éditions Errance, 1986), pp. 21–6.
- ⁴⁰ B. R. Hartley, 'The Wandlebury Iron Age Hillfort, Excavations of 1955–6', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 50 (1957), 1–27.
- ⁴¹ J. W. Barber, P. Halstead, H. F. James and F. Lee, 'An unusual Iron Age burial at Hornish Point, South Uist', *Antiquity*, 63 (1989), 773–78.
- ⁴² Lara Maiklem, *Mudlarking: Lost and Found on the River Thames* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 10.
- ⁴³ B. Lambot, 'Les Morts d'Acy Romance (Ardennes) à La Tène Finale. Pratiques funéraires, aspects religieuses et hiérarchie sociale', *Études et Documents Fouillés*, 4. *Les Celtes. Rites Funéraires en Gaule du Nord entre le Vie et l' Ier siècle avant Jésus Christ* (Namur: Ministère de la Région Walionne, 1998), pp. 75–87; B. Lambot, 'Victimes, Sacrificateurs et Dieux', in V. Guichard and F. Perrin (eds), *L'Archéologue: Archéologie Nouvelle, Hors Série 2* (2000), pp. 30–6.
- ⁴⁴ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Bog Bodies Uncovered* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015a).

EPILOGUE

THE UNTOUCHED CAVE REVISITED

Culver Hole cave, first introduced in the Prologue, is real, but it may serve also as a metaphor for the ancient Druids. It is a dark, secret, elusive and mysterious place, difficult of access, its finds hard to interpret. Caves are awkward and sometimes frightening places. Visitors to caves turn their back on the light and venture on to dark, unmapped paths, some of which lead ultimately to great caverns, others to dead ends and rock-falls. As its principal goal, this book has sought to explore the enigma of the Druids, to attempt an untangling of the complex archaeological markers that may – or may not – indicate the presence of this strange priesthood in Gaul and Britain, whilst trying to use as a guiding mechanism the tortuous, sometimes conflicting tracks set down in the records of Classical writers. To my mind, the evidence of Iron Age and Roman archaeology and the broadly contemporary (although foreign) ancient literature is best treated like a piece of lacework, containing connected threads of veracity, with massive holes of ignorance yawning in between. But the remote cave on Gower, with its curious deposits of cult figurines, has another role to play in thinking about the Druids for – as posited in the Prologue – there is some credibility in treating Wales not as a fringe location but, perhaps, as central to the influence of this religious power group, particularly at a time of the threat posed by Rome to the autonomy of this region, as it teetered on the farthest western edge of the known world.

The evidence for Druids – literary and archaeological – depicts a group of people whose identity is always in shadow. Were they 'backwoodsmen', tree huggers and potion mixers, as Pliny would have us believe? Were Roman writers, such as Tacitus, Diodorus and Lucan, correct in portraying their principal functions as hunters of dark groves, where they conducted savage rites, including the gory sacrifice of people to savage and vengeful deities? Or should we follow Caesar in his treatment of the Druids as theocrats, sophisticated philosophers, scientists, time lords, keepers of memory and curators of tradition? And what light can archaeology shed on the mixed messages of ancient texts? If (and it is a big 'if'), it is valid to connect the Druids – or their like – to the material culture of ritual in Iron Age Gaul and Britain, it must always be borne in mind that this

evidence has to be for the most part circumstantial. The discovery of constructed shrines, such as Gournay (containing the remnants of organized ritual behaviour, including cattle sacrifice at fixed periods of time), and the identification of ceremonial staves and headgear are sufficient to indicate the presence of powerful religious functionaries who operated on a wide stage. If – as seems increasingly likely – Iron Age La Tène art had a primarily sacral function, who was more likely to have driven its production than holy men or women? More vocal still are the objects that speak of divinatory rituals, for which writers like Caesar and Cicero, credited the Druids. And some of this ‘prophetic’ material hints at practices that, in many traditional societies, would be deemed shamanistic: the use of hallucinogens to achieve trance, out-of-body experience in order to reach the spirit world, determine the will of the gods and invoke their aid, whether for battle, for healing or for a good harvest.

Were the Romans right to fear the power of the Druids as jihadists, agitators for independence, just as Caesar feared the influence of Dumnorix in Gaul? If the sacrifice of Lindow Man did coincide with the events of AD 60 it might, just might have been timed to avert the Roman army’s assault upon the holy island of Anglesey. The firing of the temple of Claudius at Colchester could be interpreted purely in terms of the desire to annihilate the Roman settlers who fled there for sanctuary. But it might have served another purpose, as a contribution to a holy war.

Archaeological evidence points subtly to the continuance of Gallo-British religion (and the Druids) post-conquest. To illustrate the lingering of religious independence after the Roman conquest in Gaul, we may point, as a *cause célèbre*, to the great sacred calendar from Coligny, written in Gaulish and containing multiple references to the old pre-Roman religious year. And it is beyond temptation not to seize upon the finds from Chartres, an underground shrine dating to the second century AD, furnished with incense burners inscribed with a list of spirits, including ‘Dru’, as firm testimony to the survival of these priests, at least in the imagination of the Carnutian tribe two centuries after the last pre-conquest annual Druidic assembly held in their territory.

The new technologies of worship – in the form of epigraphy and the mass-production and dissemination of iconographical representations of the gods – did not deter those Britons and Gauls who wished to retain their old religious beliefs and ritual customs. We see this independence shining through in Gallo-British god names and in the subversion of ‘human’ realism in sacred images. Cult iconography that depicts deities with three heads, antlers or exaggerated body parts suggests native

influences at work, both in terms of production and consumption. The evidence from Fison Way, Thetford, indicates the power of sacred memory for more than three centuries after the Boudican rebellion, even though the early Icenian wooden assembly hall was so systematically destroyed by Suetonius's troops that no visible trace of it survived in the landscape.

The recent programme of radiocarbon dating, part of the Technologies of Enchantment Project, shows that 'Iron Age' La Tène art traditions lingered long, particularly in Wales. A telling object from Coygan in Pembrokeshire is a case in point. The site was a defended farm that began its life in the Iron Age and thereafter appears to have had periods of desertion and reoccupation during the Roman period. But there was also a cave close by and it was here that a hoard of material, dating to the time of the late third-century breakaway Roman emperor Carausius, was discovered in the early nineteenth century. According to records made at the time of the finds, the hoard comprised a bronze strainer and sixty Carausian coins plus a bronze *trulleus*, a skillet of the type used by Roman soldiers for cooking. But on the base of this pan was something very un-Roman, a triskele motif (see Figure 55), which was beloved of Iron Age artists, especially in Wales.¹

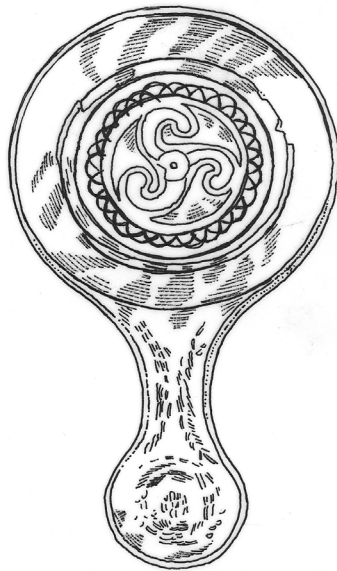


FIGURE 55 Late third-century AD bronze *trulleus* (saucepan) from a hoard found in Coygan Cave, Carmarthenshire, bearing a La Tène design of a triskele on its base. © Paul Jenkins.

So, this book begins and ends with a Welsh cave. There is enough evidence for the Druids – or a similar group of powerful theocrats operating in Iron Age in Gaul and Britain – to be confident not only in their existence but also of their continuance well into the Roman period in both provinces. The records of Classical writers provide a framework within which the archaeological testimony can be placed. Ancient texts provide a considerable amount of information about the Druids but also a lot of misinformation or even disinformation. Archaeological evidence is both firmer and more elusive than texts, capable of a raft of interpretations, particularly in the realms of religion and belief. So, visitors to these realms, particularly in the remote past, will always stumble and stray off well-trodden paths as they venture into cave-like shadowlands. For us, the ancient Druids must always reside in these misty places, but the attempt of the journey to locate them remains utterly worthwhile.

Note

- ¹ Chris Arnold and Jeffrey Davies, *Roman and Medieval Wales* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 119; Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 235–6, fig. 73.

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INDEX

A

abatón 21–2, 105, 117
 Acy-Romance 158–9
 Adsgasona 108, 135
 Aedui 3, 13–14, 37, 65, 137
 Aelianus, Claudius 155
 afterlife *see* otherworld
 Agricola 104
 Alci 25
 Alde, river 103
 Alésia 119
 Andraste 18, 31, 97, 102, 107–8
 Anglesey 3, 4, 11, 16–17, 19, 25, 36, 47, 87–9, 90, 99–101, 103, 164
 animals *see* under individual species; sacrifice
 Annwn 80, 82–3
 antlers 64–6, 71–2, 135–8, 164
 see also Cernunnos; deer; heads
 Anvallis 124
 Apollo 25, 34–5, 88, 136
 Belenus 20
 Aragorn 153
 Arausio, Battle of 32
 Arawn 80
 Arberth (Narberth) 80
 Ariovistus 60
 Arminius 119
 Armit, Ian 51
 art, La Tène 2, 44, 55, 59–74, 84, 86, 88, 150, 165
 Artemisia 117
 Arthur, 82
 Arverni 153
 Ashill 104
 Asklepios 21

Athenaeus 12, 28–9
 Augustus 35, 105
 Aurelian 12, 18–19
 augury 14, 65, 105, 123
 Augustan Histories *see* *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*
 Ausonius 12, 19–22, 92, 143
 Avernus 41

B

Badami 70
 Ballachulish 73–4, 140
 Barkway 27, 144
 Batavians/Batavii 32–3, 118–20
 Bath xviii, 5, 117, 139–40
 Battersea Shield 47
 Beating the Bounds 59
 Bellovaci 50, 151
 Bible 10
 binding 53
 birds 123
 see also ravens; vultures
 Bliesbruck 44
 boar 15, 48, 65
 triple-horned 72
 Böckingen 26
 Bodvoc 65
 bogs 73, 84, 87, 91–2
 bog-bodies/
 deposition 3, 53, 74, 99–101, 140, 159
 see also Haraldskaer; Lindow Man
 Boii 75
 Bolards 137–8
 Bordeaux 19–20

Boudica 3, 18, 30–2, 45, 60, 97–111, 119, 143–4
 boundaries 42, 50, 70, 118, 137
 Bouray 61
 Bradley, Richard 42
 Brân (Bendigeidfran) 80
 breakage, ritual 54
 Brigantes 149–150
 Britannia Prima 141
 British Museum 2
 Bronze Age 42
 Bryn y Môr Farm 69–70, 90–1
 buckets 151–2, 158
 bulls 13, 17
 burials 3, 52–5, 79–82, 85–6, 133–4, 147–59
 cremation 151–2, 158
 excarnation 154–5
 sky 155
 see also funerals

C

Caerwent 91–2
 Caesar, Julius 1–3, 5, 9–13, 15–16, 22, 25, 27–30, 32, 35–7, 44–5, 49–51, 59–60, 65, 71, 73, 101–3, 120, 123–4, 126, 131, 141–2, 147–8, 153–4, 163–4
 Cahors 72
 calendars 5, 125–6
 see also Coligny
 Camulodunum *see* Colchester
 cannibalism 31, 51–3, 107, 109, 156–7
 Caratacus 105, 111
 Carausius 165
 Carmarthen 92

- Carnutes 2, 60, 123–4,
132, 142, 164
carnyx (pl. *carnyces*) 15, 48
Cartimandua 149
Castell Nadolig 3, 84, 123
Castor (and Pollux) 25
cauldrons 32, 79–83,
85, 87
caves 1, 4–5, 34, 41–4,
91–2, 163–6
celibacy 34
Celtiberia 155
 see also Numancia
Celtic languages 67
Cernunnos 64, 136
Cerrig-y-Drudion 3, 86–7,
147
Chadwick, Nora 1, 10,
19–20
Chamalières 62
chariots 30, 66, 71
 burials 149–50, 152–4
Chartres 2, 111, 122–4,
131, 143, 164
Chester 27, 131
chickens, burial of 103
Christianity 10, 20, 68, 70,
79, 82, 142
Cicero 13–14, 18, 27, 45,
101, 164
Cimbri 32, 82
Cirencester *see* Corinium
Civilis, Julius 32–3, 119
Claudius 19, 98, 103, 116,
152, 164
Cleopatra 32
Clermont-Ferrand 119
Client-rulership 98–9,
102, 149
coins 5, 15, 17, 63–6, 71,
109, 136, 142, 148
Colchester
 (Camulodunum) 31,
98, 103–7, 116, 151,
164
Coligny Calendar 5,
125–6, 148, 164
collyrium stamps 117
Cologne 119
*Commemoratio Professorum
 Burdigalensium* 19–20
Commius 64
convolvulus 120
Cool, Hilary 63–4
Copenhagen 20
Corinium 65, 72, 135–8,
141
Coventina's Well,
 Carrawburgh 121
Coygan Cave 165–6
Creighton, John 63–4
Crete 42
Crosby Ravensworth 84,
123
 crowns *see* headdresses
Culver Hole Cave 4–5,
42–3, 91–2, 163
Cunliffe, Barry 2
curation 46, 71, 83, 91
 of memory 71
curses 17, 107–8, 133,
135, 148
D
damnatio memoriae 109,
111
dancers 42
Danebury 53–4, 69, 138,
155–7
darkness 42, 44, 92
 see also moon; night
Deal, Mill Hill 53–4, 85,
147, 160
death 147–59
 treatment of the dead
 133
 see also burials; graves;
 reincarnation;
 sacrifice, human
decapitation 47, 51, 66–8,
103–4, 133, 135, 156,
160
 see also heads
Decianus Catus 99, 108
deer 102, 137–8
 see also antlers
defleshing 160
defixiones *see* curses
Delphidius 20–1
Denmark 81–2
Deposition 46–8, 52,
60–1, 84
 see also votives
desecration 104
Diana 131
Dio Cassius 18, 30–1, 60,
98, 102, 104, 107–8
Diocletian 12, 19, 141
Diodorus Siculus 1,
11–12, 28–30, 36, 71,
62, 66, 126, 147–8, 163
Dionysos/us 88, 106
Dis Pater 5, 56, 102
dismemberment 156–8
 see also decapitation
distortion, somatic 62, 91
 see also exaggeration
Diviciacus 3, 13–14, 27,
30, 37, 65, 71, 97, 101
divination 3, 14, 17, 28–9,
31–2, 51, 84, 101–2,
113–26, 164
 see also spoons
Dobunni 65
dogs 21
Dogon (Mali) 36–7
dreams 21–2, 105, 124
drugs *see* hallucinogens
Druidesses *see* priestesses
drowning *see* sacrifice,
 human
Dumnorix 13–15, 37,
101, 164
ducelinata *see* curses
E
Egypt 32, 115, 132
Entremont 51, 53
Epidaurus 21
Epping Forest 45
Esus 25–7, 131, 136
Euripides (*The Bacchae*)
32
exaggeration (of body-
 parts) 62, 69–70, 90–2,
163
exarnation 143–5, 161
experimental archaeology
35–6, 123
eyes 117
F
fake news 30, 32, 36–7

Farley Heath 89
 Faunus 143–4
 feasting 49, 85, 107, 110, 158
 Ffynnogion 3
 Finland 42
 fire 35
 First Nation Australians 93
 First Nation North
 Americans 93, 160, 161
 Fiskerton 47–8
 Fitzpatrick, Andrew 2, 50, 61
 Florus 60
 Forum Boarium 35
 Fox, Cyril 47
 Furies (and frenzied women) 17, 19, 104, 106

G

Gabriel, Peter 149
 Gabyshev, Alexander 37
 gaming boards 116–17
 gender neutrality/transition 34, 72
 geo-politics 10
 Germani/Germans 10, 14, 19, 25, 32–3, 59, 82, 114–15, 117–20, 135
 ghost army/ghost killing 152–4
 Gondole 152–3, 161
 goose 103
 Gournay-sur-Arond 50–1, 157, 164
 Grauballe Man 126
 graves *see* burials
 Great Houghton 133–5, 154
 Griaule, Marcel 36–7
 groves 16–18, 25, 41–2, 44–5, 49, 52, 59, 92, 140
 Guilden Morden 133
 Gundestrup 81
 Gutuater/trus 124
 Gwehelog 92

H

Hades 79
 hallucinogens 36, 117, 120, 133, 150, 164
 Haraldskaer 74
 hare 31, 97–8, 102, 109–10
 Harlech 80
 haruspicy 14, 105
 Hayling Island 49, 95, 128
 heads 66–70, 79, 82, 90, 156
 antlered 64, 72
 exaggerated 62
 hunting 51–3
 severed 15, 53, 64, 67–9, 82, 90, 104
 see also decapitation
 headdresses 3, 5, 138, 164
 crowns 82, 85–7
 diadems 54–5, 85
 healing 21–2, 25, 38, 62, 105, 111, 116–17, 137–8, 151–2
 Helvetii 14
 Hen-Dy 90
 hermaphrodite 137–8
 Herodian 13
 High Pasture Cave 44
 Hinduism 70
 Hochdorf 42
 Hockwold-cum-wilton 55
 Homer 29
 horns 136
 see also antlers; Cernunnos
 Hornish 157–8
 horses 51, 103, 142, 153, 155, 157
 gear 149
 hobby-horse 70
 horseman 67–8, 103, 141–2
 horsemaster 17, 66
 human-headed
 triple-tailed 65
 Humbug 97–9
 hurdles 74, 140
 see also bog-bodies

I

Iceni 45, 60, 98–9, 109

iconography *see* imagery
 imagery 59–74, 89, 103–4, 135
 animal/human 61–2, 64
 see also antlers
 incense-burners *see* *thuribula*
 India 70
 Insubres 60
 interpretes 21
 interpretatio romana 25
 Inveresk 91
 Ireland 68, 79, 82, 138, 145
 Islam 2
 islands 42–3, 70, 87, 101, 164
 see also Anglesey
 jihad/ist 165
 Jupiter 25, 60, 141
 Jupiter-columns 26, 141–2
 Jupiter Taranucnus 26

K

Karnataka 70
 killing, ritual (of objects) 88
 see also breakage
 Kimmeridge 133
 Kollhellaren 42

L

La Chaussée-sur-Marne 160
 La Tène 2, 44, 46–8, 86, 88, 165
 see also art; La Tène
 lake 41, 46–7, 59, 87–8
 Lampinen, Antti 29
 Lankhills, Winchester 133
 Larzac 107–8, 135
 Legolas 152
 Lejars, Thierry 47
 Lesenho 161
 ligature 70
 see also binding
 Liguria 12

Lindow Man/Moss 3–4,
53–4, 92, 99–100, 113,
126, 145, 164
see also bog-bodies
Lingones 137
lituus 64–5
Livy 155
Llanfihangel Tor y
Mynydd 71
Llyn Cerrig Bach 3, 47–8,
63, 69, 83, 87–9
Llyn Fawr 83
Londinium (London) 31,
103, 106, 115
The Lord of the Rings 152–3
Lot-casting 114–18
Loucetius Mars (and
Nemetona) 138–9
Loughnashade 44–5, 88
Lowbury Hill 44
Lucan 1, 11, 15–16, 25, 27,
36, 45, 73, 79–80, 92,
131, 140, 147, 163
Lydney 21–2, 105–6, 117,
124
lyre 44

M

Mabinogi 80–2
McFarlane, Robert 16,
42, 45
Maçon 124
magi/magic 10, 12–13,
18, 123, 132
Maidstone 65
Manching 120–1
Mari Lwyd 70–1
Mark Antony 32
Marshall, Tim 10
Mars 25, 49, 124, 135
Loucetius 138–9
Teutates 144
marsh *see* bog
mask xviii, 5, 51
Massilia (Marseille) 16,
41, 45, 73
Matholwch 80
medicine *see* healing
medicine bundles 150,
160
Medugenus 142–3

Mela, Pomponius 147
memory 141–2
Mercury 25, 135–6
Middle East 10
Milton Ferry,
Peterborough 115
Minerva 25, 117, 135,
139–40
mirrors 149–50
mistletoe 4, 13, 17, 53,
99, 101
Mithras 91
Moltinus 124
Mona *see* Anglesey
moon 4, 5, 13, 17, 42, 53,
91, 99, 101, 125–6
eclipse of 49
Morrigna (s. Morrigán)
145
Moskenes 42–3
mother-goddess 5, 43
mountain 42
Mšecké Zehrovice 68–9
mummification 158–9
music 42, 44, 62, 88
mutilation 51
see also decapitation
Mystic Britain (television
series) 35–6, 97–8

N

Naharvali 25
Narberth *see* Arberth
Navan fort 44, 88
neck-ring *see* torc
Nemesis 108
Nemetona 138–40
Nene, river 115
Neolithic 121
Nero 19, 31, 99, 119
Nerthus 59
Neuvy-en-Sullias 42
New Guinea 161
night 5, 44
see also Coligny; Dis
Pater; Moon
Nodens 21, 105, 124
see also Lydney
Norse mythology 138
Norway (Lofoten Islands)
42

Numancia 67–8, 155
Numerian 12

O

oak 132
Valonia 4, 13, 17, 53,
101
ogham 115, 126
Oliver, Neil 123
omens 104–5
oracle
stones 91–2
see also Sibyl
oral tradition 79–82
oratio obliqua 105
Orgetorix 14–15
ossuaries 51
Ostorius Scapula 98
otherworld 5, 38, 42, 55,
79–82, 117–18, 147–59
Oxford, University of 2

P

pairing 83–4, 87
Paris 26–7, 119
Parsi 161
Patera 20–1
Pauvreley 62
Pentikäinen, Juha 20
Peregrinus 138–9
Peregrinatio pro Dei amore
82
Périgueux 128
Phoebicius 19–21
Phoenicians 35
see also Carthage;
Punic Wars
pilgrim/age 62, 92, 109,
117
pit 69
see also Danebury
Plutarch 88
Pocklington 152–4
Polyhistor 12
Pompey 16
Pontifex Maximus 27
Pontus 12
portent *see* omens
Posidonius 1, 12, 28–30,
155

Prasutagus 98–9, 102
Preiddeu Annwn 82–3
 priests 5, 28, 85, 92, 98,
 117, 123, 150–2, 156
 priestesses (Druidesses)
 18–19, 30, 32–3, 35,
 101–2
 prophecy 18–19, 30, 35,
 82, 108, 113, 119, 123,
 138, 150, 164
 Punic Wars 35, 88, 155
 Putin, Vladimir 37
 Pwyll 80
 Pythagoras 1, 29, 147–8,
 159

R

rabbit 97–8
 rape 99, 108
 ravens 138, 145
 rebirth *see* reincarnation
Red Book of Hergest 93
 reincarnation 29–30,
 79–82, 147–59
 relativism 2
 Remi 66
 Rennes 17
 reservoir, sacred 5
 Rheims (Reims) 136,
 141
 Ribemont-sur-Ancre
 50–1, 157–8
 Rivers 74, 115
see also Nene; Severn;
 Thames; Witham
romanitas 71, 98, 144
 Rome 9, 14
 Roos Carr 73
 Roquepertuse 51
 runes 113–16
 Russia 20

S

sacred space 53
see also shrines
 sacrifice
 animal 17, 47, 49, 83,
 87, 105, 113, 149,
 155, 157, 164
 aversion 99–100

human 4, 16, 17, 25,
 29–31, 34–6, 41, 44,
 46–8, 51–3, 59, 74,
 88, 99–100, 106–7,
 113, 149, 152,
 157–8
 overkill *see* ghost
 killing; triple
 killing
 sacrificial equipment 55,
 84, 151–2
 Saint-Georges-lès-
 Baillargeaux 53–5,
 160
 Saluvii 51–3
 Sámi 20–2, 37, 42, 117–18
 San (Southern African)
 93
 sanctuaries 16, 21–2
see also shrines
 Sauron 153
 Savory, Hubert 83
 Scandinavia 20
see also Finland;
 Norway
 sceptre 67–8, 89, 120, 164
Scriptores Historiae
Augustae 12, 18–19,
 30, 102
 Sedatus, Gaius Verius,
 111, 123–4, 132
see also Chartres
 seer *see* prophecy
 Senilis, Titus Flavius
 21–2, 105
 Sequani 137
 sequestration 33, 118–20
 Severa Tertionigna 108,
 111, 135
Severi Augustales 98
 Severn, river 21–2
 Severus Alexander 18–19
 shaman/ism 20–2, 37–8,
 72, 83, 92, 102, 116–17,
 120–1, 124, 133, 137–8,
 143, 145, 150–60, 164
 shape-shifting 21, 62,
 70–2, 79, 137–8, 145
 shrines 2, 49, 74, 87–8,
 91–2, 98–9, 103–5, 117,
 121–4, 132, 137–8,
 155, 164

Siberia 37
 Sibyl (of Cumae) 34–5
 Silius Italicus 155
sistra 115
 sky-god *see* Jupiter
 slave/slave-chains 47–8,
 87–8, 149
 snake-ram-horned 72,
 135–8
 Snettisham 60, 62
 Sol 91, 142
 Sotion 12
 Soul-flight 21, 71
see also shaman
 spells *see* curses
 spirit-world *see*
 otherworld
 spoons 3, 83–4, 94, 113,
 123, 142–3, 152
 springs, sacred 16, 41, 62,
 74, 89, 138–40
 Stanway 116–18, 151
 Stoicism 29
see also Posidonius
 storytelling *see* oral tales
 Strabo 1, 11–12, 28, 32,
 46, 82, 87, 147
 subversion 72, 104,
 133, 135–8, 140–1,
 164
 Suetonius Paulinus 4, 11,
 16–19, 36, 99–100, 103,
 106, 109, 165
 Sulis (Minerva) 5, 117,
 139–40
 surreality 65, 71, 135,
 164
 Syme, Ronald, 119
symposia see feasting
 syncretism 2, 138–42

T

Tacitus 3, 11, 15–17, 19,
 25, 31–4, 36, 47, 98,
 103–6, 114–15, 117,
 119, 140, 163
 tankards 83–5
 Taranis 25–7, 131
see also Jupiter
 Taranucus
 Tartigry 151–2, 156

- Technologies of Enchantment* Project 2–3, 86
- Tectosages 46
- Tel Arad 128
- temples 5, 18
see also shrines
- Teutas/Teutates (Mars) 25, 27, 131, 144
- Teutoberg Forest 119
- Thallus, Norbaneius 124
- Thames, river 47, 99, 104, 106
- theocracy 2, 10, 20, 27–8, 132, 166
- Thetford 45, 94, 109, 142–4, 165
- thresholds 70–2, 83
- thuribula* 2, 117, 121–1, 124, 131–2, 143, 164
- Tibet 161
- Tiberius 27
- Tiermes 155
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 152–3
- tonsure 68
- torc 30, 60–2, 65–6, 68, 70, 134–5, 154
- Toulouse 46
- Tour 66
- towers *see* sequestration; Veleda
- Tower of Babel 127
- trance 21–2, 120–1, 133, 143
see also shaman
- Trawsfynydd 84
- Treaddur Bay, Anglesey 11
- treasure 46
- tree 16, 18, 44–5, 73
 alder 73
 oak 4, 13, 17, 53, 101, 132
 yew 73, 84
- Treveri 138–40
- Trinovantes 98–9, 103, 109, 116
- triple
 face 137–8
 head 164
 horns 72
 killing 53, 101, 107, 113
 tail 65
 triskele 63, 165
 trophies/trophy-sites 47, 50, 62, 67
trulleus 165
 trumpets 44–5, 88
see also *carnyx*
- Twelfth Night 70
- U**
- uidla* 108
see also prophecy
- underground 44–5, 132
- underworld *see* otherworld
- V**
- Vaccae 155
- Varro 155
- Veleda 32–33, 118–20, 124
- Veliocasses 65
- Venclová, Natalie 68
- Vercingetorix 119, 153
- Verica 64
- Verulamium 103, 106
 Folly Lane 110, 118, 152, 156
- Vestal Virgins 34, 128
- Victorinus 21–2, 105–6, 124
- Victory 31, 104, 106–7
- Viereckschanze* 69
- Vindolanda 148
- Virgil, *Aeneid* 34, 41
- votives 44, 87–9, 104, 158
 miniature weapons 158
- vultures 155
- W**
- Wales 2–4, 42–3, 79–96, 163–6
 National Museum
 Wales 2
- Wanborough 55, 87, 89
- Wandlebury 157
- Wandsworth Shield 47
- war 25, 28, 30, 50–1, 66
 -gear 46–9, 54, 66, 83, 85, 159
 goddesses
 prisoners-of-war 32, 47, 82, 87, 157, 159, 161
 sanctuaries 47, 49–51, 157–8
see also Mars
- warriors 42, 55, 81, 85, 153
- water 41, 46–9, 50, 59, 62, 74, 82, 87–9
see also lakes; rivers; springs
- Waterloo Helmet 47
- Wetwang 49–50, 156
- Wheel-ornaments 64, 86, 87
- White Book of Rhydderch* 93
- wicker man 35–6, 51
 sanctuary 74
- Williams, Rowan 1
- Winklebury 138
- wise women 150
- witchcraft 133
see also curses
- Witham, river 48
 Shield 48
- wood/land 41–2, 72–4, 140
 wooden images 62
see also trees
- wood-wide-web 16
- Woolf, Greg 29
- Y**
- Year of the Four Emperors 33
- yogic position 61
- Z**
- zombies 80
- Zurich Altstetten 102

Ancient Classical authors have painted the Druids in a bad light, defining them as a barbaric priesthood who, two thousand years ago, perpetrated savage blood rites in ancient Britain and Gaul in the name of their gods. Archaeology tells a different and more complicated story of this enigmatic priesthood, a theocracy with immense political and sacred power. This book explores the tangible 'footprint' the Druids have left behind: in sacred spaces, art, ritual equipment, images of the gods, strange burial rites and human sacrifice. Their material culture indicates how close was the relationship between Druids and the spirit-world, which evidence suggests they sometimes accessed through drug-induced trance.

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